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One Day, Some Day

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One Day, Some Day

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Douglas R. Fisher

May, 1996

One Day, Some Day

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One Day, Some Day

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May, 1996

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When someone asks us how old we are, we tell them the number of years that we have lived. But those years are comprised of days: days that wrinkle our brows, burn searing holes in our souls, and those days--filled with joy, terror, humor, fear, and exasperation--are the sum totals of our age. One Day, Some Day is a collection of short fiction that deals with the events of one day in the life of the characters. The titles of the stories reflect this theme, i.e., "Thursday's Child," "A Measure of Days," and "One of These Days." I have endeavored to inject my stories with the emotions and experiences that comprise our daily lives.

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Thursday's Child

"C'mon in, get right up in the chair. Want a trim or would you like me to work my stuff? Just a trim? Okey-dokey, you're the boss.

"No, ain't too busy. Ford laid off, and the kids all think their buddies give a better haircut than I do, what with them cutting stripes and arrows and what not in they hair. Live and let live I always say. Let me tell ya about the other night. Me and old Dolores: Isham McNeilly's ex-old lady. Yeah, we're stepping out. Well, as I was saying. We was in Taco Bell the other night, Wednesday night it was, after the Legion Bingo. We was sitting there, minding our own business, and this young guy walks in, and damned if his hair wasn't shoulder length on one half his head and shaved plumb to the scalp on the other. He was wearing a skirt. Yessir, a skirt. Dolores says it was a kilt. And get this, his fingernails was an inch long and, so-help-me-Hannah, they was painted black. I swear to God.

"Here I am sitting there eating my Nachos Bell Grande, minding my own beeswax, and I lean over to this guy and I say, 'damn, buddie, you in a band or something?' And so help me, he looks me right in the face and as bold as brass, right there in front of God and Dolores, and says, 'No, I'm queer.' Don't that beat all you ever heard?

"But, like I was saying, I'm doing alright. At least I'm thankful for the work I got. Not like some I know.

"Take them ball players. Some of them make a billion damn dollars a year, and they ain't happy. You always had this cowlick? I'll fix her if ya . . . okey-dokey you're the boss, I'll just trim around it. And, as I was saying, they ain't happy. Can you imagine making that kinda money for playing a game? Most of them still be share cropping, or sitting around singing "Day-yo" on some damn banana farm or something if they wasn't able to play baseball. Why, when we was little we played ball for the fun of it. We woulda paid somebody to let us play if it hadn't been free. Say, sure you don't want me to fix your cowl . . . okey-dokey, you're the boss.

"I haven't seen you around before. You new to town ain't ya? Yeah, when you're in my line you know all the faces. Maybe I should have said 'all the heads.' Bought the old Terry place did you? Well, how about that, the old Terry place. I knowed them Terrys all my life. Owned the drugstore here in town, they did. Now, I ain't one to carry no tales or nothing, but they was something odd about them Terrys. Say what? A little more off the sides? Okey-dokey, you're the boss. Where was I? Oh yeah, the Terrys. Like I was saying, they was odd. The old man got carted off to the bughouse for setting fires in the attic. Yeah, the attic. I don't guess they was too much damage, or maybe they fixed it up after the roof burnt. They didn't tell you about that, you say? Imagine that. Just like I'm always

saying, you can't trust nobody but family. Who was it you said sold you that place? Really? Him? Yeah, I know him alright . . . he's my brother. Imagine that, would you, my brother sold you the old Terry place. It's almost like we was kin. Whatcha say? Dishonest? Well, I couldn't say nothing about that. I won't do no business with him, though. You sure I can't give ya a shampoo or something? Neck massage? Okey-dokey, you're the boss. That'll be six bucks then, and you come back.

"Next."

"You know? I was telling that guy that just left, yeah that new guy. He's the one bought the Terry place. I was telling him, seeing as to how he was asking me about the house and all. Whatta you mean, 'Am I nosy?'" I don't stick my nose in nobody's business, no sir, less they ask me. Anyhow . . . say, is that eczema in your scalp? I got some tonic that'll . . . Doctor's taking care of it, you say, okey-dokey, you're the boss.

"Anyway, he was askin' me about the old house, you know the fires and all. I know. I know. But you know how them city people are, just got to live in a small town, think they're God's gift to us hayshakers. I told him the very first time he ever come in here for a haircut about the fires, bout the attic and the roof and all, but he went right on ahead and bought it anyhow.

"I was telling him about how odd them Terrys was, the old man and all. Yeah, I remember Janice. I watched her walk down to the bus station the day she left. You sure are

right there, I wasn't the only one to watch that woman walk. What with her not wearing enough clothes to pad a crutch . . . reminded me of two little boys fighting under a blanket. Now, I ain't racial or nothing, but when she married that nig . . . that colored boy from up in Louisville, well I knowed she was a tramp. Told my old lady, that's what happens when ya send girls away to college. They learn things they got no business learning. I told her, 'Look how well you did, and you didn't have no college did ya?' She turned around and said, 'Yessir, I done real good for myself, didn't I?' Made me feel so proud. No, that was about eight months before she left me. To this day, I don't know what got into that woman. Think you might like to try that tonic, or . . . okey-dokey, you're the boss. That'll be six dollars and come back now.

"Next."

"Haven't seen you in a while. Boy, it sure has been a long time judging by the length of your hair. I tell ya what I'll do: I won't charge you for this haircut . . . I'll charge you for the four you should have got. Business been pretty good. I was telling that guy that bought the old Terry place . . . have you ever thought about wearing your hair combed straight back? Been wearing it this way for thirty years, you say . . . okey-dokey you're the boss.

"I was telling that young guy about the Terrys, and how strange they was. No I never did get around to telling him about the old lady. Wasn't she something? Always a rip roaring through town in that old Packard. No I never did

see that movie, but I bet that Miss Daisy wasn't no worse a driver than Ida May Terry. Yeah, I remember her daddy. He was a case hisself wasn't he? About beat them two Jehovah's Witnesses half to death with that leaf rake he did. Well, anyway, the old lady she got to acting all strange when that boy of hers was found dead behind the I.G.A. store. Yeah, it was an overdose. Didn't know that stuff was around. Well, anyway, she started a sending money to ever damn one of those T.V. preachers. Yeah, she said she didn't care about that, said them girls was probably sent by the Lord to test their faith. That may be so, but don't it seem to you like their faith is always being tested while they buck naked in a motel room with some dolly? She started to speak in tongues and slobber and carry on so that people was scared to be around her. Yeah. When she died, they found all them needles in her room. Seems she was hooked on the stuff that killed her boy. Morphine it was. She must of been taking that stuff out of their drugstore for years. If you should ever think about changing your hairstyle . . . okey-dokey, you're the boss. That'll be six dollars and you come back.

"Next."

"Hello, Isham. Yeah, I'm still seeing Dolores. No, I can't say we're ready to marry. Now, Isham McNeilly, I didn't say that she wasn't fit to marry; she's probably good marrying stock. After all, you married her, didn't you? Well, okay then. Your tobacco doing well, is it? Glad to hear that. You know, I've been thinking about them Terrys

all day, and I swear if they wasn't the oddest one family. Yeah, Edmond was the oldest boy. No that was Arthur that was doing them drugs. Edmond was a case wasn't he? Remember the time he bought that fire truck? Yeah didn't he beat all, driving around town in that big old red, shiny fire truck. Giving all the kids rides. Wasn't no harm in him at all, was they? Then he went and hired his own fire department, and set hisself up as chief. Well, the idiots on the Volunteer Fire Department was just jealous. Just cause his truck was better than what they had. You sure you ain't still hot for old Dolores, Isham? Okey-dokey, you're the boss. As I was saying, the Fire Board started complaining, saying he wasn't trained as a fireman and all. Yeah, that's what really made them mad wasn't it: he got to the fires quicker than they did, and pretty well had them out by the time they did show up. Made them a deal, he did. He gave them the fire truck, and they made him Fire Chief. He stayed chief for damn near forty years. He just loved to go to fires, with the siren wailing and the horn a blowing, and him a setting in the driver's seat like he was a king or something. That whole damn family musta been firebugs, what with the old man and all. Yeah, Edmond did burn up trying to pull his daddy out of that attic the last time it burnt, didn't he? He was sixty and the old man musta been eighty-five or so. The old man had slipped downstairs, and Edmond not knowing it, thought he was trapped in the attic by the fire. When he opened the attic door, the roof fell on him, and he died of smoke inhalation. Yeah, it wasn't much of a

fire, but the old roof was pretty well rotten, and it went up like a haymow. It was enough to kill old Edmond, though. Well, Isham, I guess this finishes you up. Do what? Keep old Dolores? Okey-dokey, you're the boss. That'll be six bucks and you come back.

"Next."

"Well, hello, Mr. Mayor. You in need of one of my guaranteed-vote-getting-damn-where'd-that-man-get-that-haircut-haircuts? Okey-dokey, you're the boss. Sit right down.

"When we was in school, did you ever take Wanda Terry out? Well, seeing as you ask, I been thinking about them Terrys all day. Seems like I can't get them out of my head. What's that you say, plenty of room in there for them to roam around? Ha, ha. Let a damned insurance man become mayor and all of a sudden you've elected a comedian.

"Seems like she was the normalest one of the lot. Pretty girl. Always smiling and nice to meet you. Married that guy that wrote for the pictures. Met him in college, and moved to California, ten, twelve years ago. Never did hear anything from her after that.

"You lie! A pretty girl like that die from the AIDs? Oh, her husband? Had that bleeding disease did he? Got it from bad blood ya say? Oh, no. Baby got it too? That's a sin and a shame, her and the baby and all. Just seems like the Terrys, considering all they had, just couldn't seem to be happy or prosper. Well, yes, Mr. Smartass, like me. I'm happy. Sometimes I can't figure out why I'm happy, but

I am. I got a trade. Got some money in the bank. And nobody in my family is on drugs, or setting fire to anything that'll burn. The only dark spot in my life is that lazy son-in-law of mine. He's out of work again. Say, Mr. Mayor, what's the chances of him getting on with the city? Have him fill out an application like everybody else, you say? Okey-dokey, you're the boss. That's eight bucks, and you come back.

"Next."

"Hello, Doc Terry. Good to see ya. Come on and sit down and I'll fix you up. It sure is funny you stopping in today of all days. Seem like everybody that come in here today has wanted to talk about your family. Well, no sir. It ain't been bad. Doc, does it seem to you that maybe your family has had more than its share of, well, characters? Or maybe just more bad luck than the normal family?

"You think your family *is* normal? Well . . . maybe for the whole country, but not for here. Not in this town.

"Doc, I've known you all my life. You delivered all my kids. You helped the ex-wife through the stillbirths, and you helped me quit the bottle. You was at the hospital when my daughter was raped, and you was even a character witness when my son was on trial for shooting that fella that raped my little girl. I got a lot of respect for you. But, Doc, they ain't no way in this world your family's normal. You know, Doc, I'm gettin this little twinge in my elbow now and then. You think it might be the arthritis? Make an appointment you say? Okey-dokey, you're the boss. This

haircut's on me, Doc. And you come back now."

Good Friday

"Dear God, I will do anything you ask if only You'll get me a C on this test."

I know this prayer by heart, I must have said it a zillion times, but not once, not even one time has it ever been answered. This may be the biggest reason a lot of guys don't believe in God, this constant inattention to detail. It really shouldn't make any difference that I haven't so much as opened the math book to the section we're being tested on. What should matter is I'm offering to become God's personal slave for a measley C. Surely, if there is a God, He could have answered at least one of those countless pre-test prayers.

Maybe what it takes to get a prayer answered is to be deathly sick, or a Saint, or a girl. Girls have a real big "in" with God. I know about girls. I know sisters. Not Nuns, nobody knows about Nuns, not even Priests--but real living, breathing, pain-in-the-ass, I'm-gonna-tell-on-you sisters. Two of them. Twins.

"If you have finished your test, check your answers and sit quietly in your seats."

That's dumb: "Sit quietly in your seat." What does she expect us to do? A teacher that'll punch you blind for looking at her cross-eyed, and she thinks she has to tell us

to sit quietly. Attila the Nun, Hell in a Habit, Sister William Mary "The Last Rites" Dunphy.

C'mon, bell, please, bell, ring. I'm afraid to look at the clock cause it seems that each time I look at it, it's fifteen minutes earlier than it was the last time. Time flies? No way, time dies. I know. It dies five minutes before the last bell on Friday afternoon. There it is, there it is, at last.

* * * *

"What did you do on your math test?"

"About like I always do. I prayed for a C, promised God everything but a hand-job and a date with Sister William Mary, failed it, and will have to take it home for Mom to sign."

"You're lucky you don't have an old man. Mine wears my ass out."

"Yeah, shithead, I'm real lucky my dad's dead, ain't I?"

"I didn't mean it that way. You know that."

"Yeah, I know that, but I get tired of hearing how tough your old man is. What makes you think I don't get my ass kicked at home?"

He's right, though. Mom don't whip me. She thinks I hurt enough. At least she gave up shipping me off to Scouts and Little League so I'd be around men. It ain't the same-- not that they weren't nice, or didn't try to teach me stuff. But it ain't the same as when Dad was alive. I'd take a whipping everyday to have him back. He's been dead two

years now, and I still feel lost. It ain't fair. No matter what Father Schulz says, it ain't fair.

"You gonna come over and watch *Rawhide* tonight?"

"Yeah, I guess so, unless Mom's going out. Then I'll have to stay with the twins."

Mom's starting to "go out." Won't call them dates--dates would mean she's thinking about getting married again, and she don't want the neighbors talking. I hope she won't marry Leonard. Big, stupid, Leonard, with his stupid finger popping: "Hey, kid--pop--what's up--pop?" If I thought he was laying a hand on Mom, I'd pour sugar in the gas tank of that stupid Ford he's so proud of. "Ain't nothing like a Ford, kid--pop--and I oughta know, I work there. Followed this baby all the way through the line--pop--ain't many like this one on the street, she's perfect--pop-pop." God, he's stupid.

"How come you gotta stay with your sisters? They ain't but a year younger than you are."

"I don't know. Maybe Mom's afraid."

"Afraid of what, robbers?"

"Naw, afraid that if they're alone there won't be anybody around to kiss their ass and wait on them hand and foot."

"Call and let me know if you can come over."

* * * *

"Mom, you going out tonight?"

"No, not tonight. Tomorrow night, maybe. Why?"

"Markie wants me to watch *Rawhide* at his place. Is it okay?"

"Sure. Are you two going to have your Friday night supper?"

"I don't know yet. I'm going to call and tell him that I'll be over."

Rawhide is our favorite television show and our "Friday Night" supper is a can of Campbell's pork and beans eaten from tin plates in front of the set. *Rawhide* ain't our favorite western. *Maverick* is, but *Rawhide* is our favorite show because we think it's funny.

The whole story is about these guys in this cattle outfit and all the hardships and troubles they have getting the stupid cattle to market. The crazy part is that the cowboys are never *with* the cattle. They're always in town, in some saloon, or on somebody's ranch recovering from snakebite, gunshot, or unlucky turns of the cards. The stupid part really starts with the theme song. The song of this western isn't sung by Rex Allen, or Tex Ritter, or even The Sons of the Pioneers--all respectable cowboy singers--but by Frankie Laine, for Chrissakes, a stupid torch singer. It's hilarious, and we're constantly asking the characters questions like: "Hey, Gil, you do-goodin fool, who's watching the stupid cows while you're settling the range war between the Mexicans and the Texans" or: "Hey, Rowdy, who's minding the cattle while you're slobbering all over the stupid dance hall girls?" It's a riot. We wouldn't miss it.

* * * *

"Before you go to Mark's, I want you to run to the store and then burn the trash, okay?"

"Sure, Mom. I'll burn the trash first."

Burning the trash is my favorite job. First because I guess there's a little bit of the fire-bug in me, and secondly it's the only job I got around here that I don't have to put up with the twins. If I'm mowing the grass, I'm missing some, or if I'm washing windows I'm not getting them clean enough. But let me fire up the burn-barrel, and you can't find a girl. They don't want to smell like smoke, it's too hot, or the soot gets in their hair. What a bunch of cry-babies girls are. All that stuff is what makes burning the trash so much fun. Feeling the heat on your face, watching the flames jump and turn, watching the white ash float on the breeze. Gee, it's great. Sometimes, on real cold days, a bunch of the guys in the neighborhood will come over and we'll stand real close to the fire and bullshit. Not talk about school or anything like that, but just talk. One time we pooled our money and got a bag of marshmallows and roasted them. They don't taste too good roasted over a newspaper fire, but it was really great just doing it with each other. Sometimes I just stare at the flames until I'm not a kid standing beside an old garbage can burning trash. I kinda drift off until I don't know where I'm at, and when I get back I don't feel the same as I did before. It's hard to explain, but all the guys know what I'm talking about. They can't explain it either, but

it's kinda like being real deep inside yourself, and if you don't want to come back, you wouldn't have to. If this works for grown-ups I might try it if I get married. That way when my wife starts to nag me or cuss at me for being a slob I'll say: Hey, hon, why don't I go burn the trash? Then, when the fire gets just right, I'll stare at it until I go wherever it is that I go, and then, not come back.

Maybe it does work for grown-ups, maybe that's where all those guys go who run off on their wives. Just go out in the yard to burn trash and check out. Could be--yeah, could be.

* * * *

"Hi, Mr. Miller. Mom wants some hamburger--yeah a pound-and-a-half--some buns, a coupla potatoes--yeah those oughta do--and some onions, and a half a gallon of milk. Yeah, hamburgers, but not tonight, tomorrow. No, not because we're Catholic, because she won't be able to come by tomorrow. Oh, yeah, she wants to know if you'll put it on the bill?"

Of course he'll put it on the bill, sometimes he don't even write it down. He thinks he can get in Mom's drawers for a pound-and-a-half of hamburger. Christ, he's stupider than Leonard. Ever since Dad died he's been real sweet acting to Mom. Taking her out, and giving her extra weight on hamburger, onions and junk like that. The cheap stuff. I keep telling her to get steak, but he'd probably charge her full for the good stuff. Thinks he's real cool. Wears his hair like Elvis. Must use a pound of grease to make it

that slick looking.

"Yeah, thanks, Mr. Miller. I'll tell Mom you said Hi."
Stupid.

* * * *

"Hi, Markie, what's going on?"

"Dad stopped off at Clancy's and had a coupla shooters with the guys and Mom's acting like he murdered the Pope."

Markie's old man is a lush. He don't beat nobody, or miss work, or even yell, but he's still a lush. Markie's old man don't have a drinking problem so much as he's got a paying problem. His "coupla shooters" was probably a fifth, and he put that on the cuff. Most of the guys' dads drink at Clancy's, and he'll let 'em run a tab to be paid off on paydays. Markie's old man probably just spent a third of his paycheck paying off for what he drank up last week. Markie's Mom is raising hell about the money, not the booze.

"Is it okay for me to stay?"

"Sure. The old man will be asleep in about ten minutes, and Mom's going to the Bingo. We'll have the house to ourselves as soon as Rosie leaves for her date."

Markie's sister Rose is a real princess. She don't walk around with that "I'm hot shit, so fall down at my feet" attitude that a lot of the high school girls have. She's pretty, so I guess she knows it, but if she does know it she don't act like she does. All the decent guys want to date her, and all the wise asses know they don't stand a chance. It'd be real great if my sisters could be like Rosie.

I can't really say too much about my sisters, except that if Rosie is a princess, they're a royal pain in the ass. A lot of it ain't their fault, what with them being twins and having everybody making a big deal out of them since they were born. Mom keeps telling me all boys feel that way about their sisters when they're young. I got a feeling a lot of grown up guys feel that way too. It would be hard not to, what with them crapping all over you for years. What's supposed to happen? One day you wake up with this overpowering urge to kiss your sister and tell her how glad you are she treated you like a dog turd all your life and you love her so much that she can keep on treating you like that? Nah, I don't think so. I see a lot of guys that used to be real regular guys, but now all they can talk about is this girl or that girl. I can see a guy falling in love and letting her treat him like crap, but I don't believe this stuff about growing up to like your sisters. That's almost like growing up to like Nuns. The way my sisters act, they'd make real good nuns. The way **my** sisters act you'd think they were in daily communication with the Virgin Mary. All the Nuns at school are always falling all over themselves complimenting Mom on how smart, how well mannered, how pretty, and how holy they are. It makes me sick. Then to rub it in they make comments like: "Isn't it a shame that your son couldn't exhibit some of your daughters' abilities?" I tell ya, I don't look to ever be too crazy about **my** sisters.

"Got a big date, Rosie?"

"No, not a big date, really not a date at all. Some of the girls decided to go see *Ben Hur* and I'm going with them."

"No guys?"

"No guys. Markie, when Mom gets back from the Bingo tell her I'll be in right after the movie. Okay?"

"Okay, Rose, have fun."

* * * *

"Call your Mom and see if you can stay and watch *Twilight Zone*. Why don't you just see if you can spend the night and in the morning I'll get Dad to take us fishing."

The *Twilight Zone*. No wonder kids like that show so much. Grown-ups don't realize it, but kids live in a kinda twilight zone. Half the stuff that goes on around us we don't understand, and if we act smart, like maybe we do understand, a grown-up will tell us that we're too young to understand what's going on and not to get too big for our britches. And if we act dumb, or like a kid, or like we **don't** understand, another grown-up will tell us that we're old enough to know better, and isn't it about time we started to act our age.

The *Twilight Zone* does this same thing to grown-ups, makes them wonder what's going on, and just about the time they think they got it figured out . . . POW.

It's like one time my grandmother gave me fifty cents for weeding her garden and flower beds. I take this money, and me and Markie go the store and buy a watermelon for fifty cents. Then we get some boards and sawhorses and we

sell watermelon by the slice on the sidewalk in front of my house. Whatever money we make we agree to split. Well, we take in a dollar: fifty cents for me and fifty cents for Markie, right? We're feeling pretty good until we tell Markie's dad how much we made, and he says: "Wait a minute, you guys didn't make a half-a-buck apiece, you only made a quarter apiece. **You** didn't take back the fifty cents the watermelon cost."

See, we were feeling good, but now all of a sudden we don't feel so hot. What was the big deal? I still had my fifty cents, and now Markie had fifty cents, and we both had the fun of selling the watermelon, and we figured we were pretty smart. But because some grown-up says different, now we feel like crap. *The Twilight Zone*, see?

* * * *

Most kids will tell you that their favorite day of the week is Saturday. I like Saturday too, but my favorite day of the week is not really a day. Well, it isn't a whole day. My favorite day of the week is the time between the last bell at school and bedtime on Fridays. I get to stay up later on Friday. I don't have to do my homework. My favorite TV shows are on, and I get to bum around with Markie, and Saturday is still tomorrow. Everybody seems to have what I call a "Friday Night" feeling. The high school kids are getting ready to go out to dances or ballgames. The grown-ups are happy because it's payday, and they can go to Bingo, like Markie's mom, or stay for an extra beer at Clancy's or stay up and watch TV, or do just about anything

they want. My dad used to come home from work on Friday nights, put his pay check on the kitchen table, and tell my mom: "Babe, here's what it's all about. Now the whole world can kiss my ass until seven o'clock Monday morning. Let's us have a Friday night."

I love Friday nights.

Happy Returns of the Day

"When we get there, Bob, I want to buy what we need and get out. Going in a WalMart with you can turn into a three-act play. We only need a few things. Then I want to go home and prop my feet up."

Bob and Mindy Ellison had been married for a lifetime. At least that's the way Bob was beginning to feel. Twenty-two years wasn't really a lifetime, but it was his entire young adult life. And now it encompassed his early middle-age.

Bob and Mindy had both worked hard for all of that married life: he as a fire fighter and she as an actuarial for an insurance company. Their only attempt at conception was a near tragedy with Mindy being hospitalized for weeks with severe hemorrhaging, and so childless, they were as secure financially as anyone in the latter part of the twentieth century could be. Mindy, to Bob's abhorrence, referred to themselves as D.I.N.K.s: double income, no kids. Mindy lusted after Yuppiedom and all of its conventions--Volvos, shopping at Dillard's, upscale appliances in the upscale mausoleum in the upscale Yuppieville, pink and green clothes, and white chili with blue tortillas. Bob, however, just wanted to be left

alone--except when it came to Walmart, then he wanted company--lots of it.

WalMart did something to him. Besides offering everything that he wanted, at prices he considered bargains, it afforded him a venue for his one-man show. WalMart seemed to turn him into a little boy . . . a mischievous little boy who wasn't satisfied until everyone in the store had a good laugh at his expense. Bob would model everything from shirts to toilet seat covers, and it really gave him a thrill to get on the house phone and page an "associate"--WalMart's term for an employee--to a certain area, and then time how long the response took. A quick response was met with praise, but a slow response was treated as a personal affront, with warnings to tell "Sam," the founder of WalMart, that one of his associates was a sluggard.

When it came to the merchandise, nothing suited Bob better than buying a pair of Doctor Scholl's shoes, at six bucks a pair, then stuffing them with enough Doctor Scholl's insoles to make them comfortable, turning a pair of very cheap shoes into enough money to buy a decent pair.

He rated cities by the size of their WalMarts: the cleanliness of the stores, and the number of R-Vs camping in their parking lots. He always threatened Mindy with the sale of their house, the purchase of a "huge son-of-a-bitch R-V," and the carefree life of the "WalMart Vagabond." Bob had deduced that WalMart stores--the mega-marts as he termed them--open twenty-four hours a day, were home to retirees and their travel trailers who now drove from one end of the

country, using the restrooms and parking lots of WalMart stores, thus allowing them to beat paying camping fees.

Mindy would sooner walk into a leper colony than a WalMart. She refused to eat anything from the grocery, and thought there must be a special heaven for those doomed to wear WalMart fashions.

Bob accused Mindy of wasting money on labels: "Dillard's, Lazarus, L. L. Bean, and if it comes from a pansy designer, you've got to have it. You don't want to be thrifty."

Mindy accused Bob of wasting money: "Why buy three cheap shirts that won't last six months when the same money will buy a good shirt that will last years? That's not being thrifty."

"Wow, look Mindy. Somebody's set up a carnival in the WalMart lot. Let's go. Please, Mindy, please?" he whined in what Mindy called his poor-mistreated-little-boy-voice.

"Oh, God, Bob. I'm too tired for that. Let's just get our shopping done and go home. Please, Bob, please?"

"Mindy I really want to go to the carnival. Is it too much to ask? Just a little fun? Huh, Mindy?"

"Bob, I told you that I was tired. It's after eight. I want to go home and read. I don't feel like walking around that damn carnival all night."

"Just a couple of hours, please Mindy. You don't ever want to play anymore."

"Okay, I'll make you a deal. I'll drop you off and come back for you at eleven. That's almost three hours for

you to be a little boy. Will that work? My feet are killing me. Really."

Doing everything he could to hide his surprise and pleasure, Bob said, "Gee, Hon. It won't be nearly as much fun without you, but if your feet are hurting, maybe you should rest them. I'll bet if you wore Doctor Scholl's shoes your feet wouldn't hurt near as bad. Mine don't bother me. I'll meet you at the merry-go-round at eleven. Bye, now."

Jumping out of the car like it was on fire, Bob was out of earshot and didn't hear Mindy say: "I guess it's a good thing we didn't have children. You're the biggest kid I could ever have."

Bob was drawn to the exploding neon reds, yellows, blues and greens like a suicidal moth; he couldn't get there quickly enough. He wanted to feel the color, taste the reds and blues, drink the noise of the barkers and crowd. He wanted to immerse his whole sentience into the nighttime world of the carnival.

The midway was alive with lights, people, and noise. The lights seemed to flash in the same dis-synchronization as the heartbeats of the crowd. The beating of his own heart telegraphed a message to his brain that repeated over and over: rides, games, people, fun, life; rides, games, people, fun, life. . . .

"Guess your age within a year or your weight inside five pounds. It only costs two bucks. You, Mister. Step right up."

As if coming out of a trance, Bob pointed to his chest and mouthed: me?

"Sure, Mister, you. If you've ever had a birthday, I can guess how old you are. And if you're affected by the force of gravity, I can tell you how much you weigh. Ain't it worth two bucks to make me a liar?"

Like a martyr to the cross, Bob stepped forward, pulling his billfold from his pocket. I'll see if he can do it, he thought.

The neat, older, kindly-looking carny looked Bob over as if he were for sale, and pronounced: "You're thirty-eight-years-old and weigh one-eighty-five."

Bob's heart skipped. "I won. I'm forty-eight and weigh one-seventy-five. I won."

"Let me see that driver's licence, step up on that scale, and we'll see if you won."

After proving his veracity, Bob was awarded twenty-eight cents worth of plaster disguised as a Ninja Turtle in exchange for his two dollars. He tucked his prize into his side pocket, and as he walked away the carny said, "See you on the backside."

"I won't come back to this game," he told the carny. "You know my age and weight, now." Bob happily walked toward the other games and rides.

After winning nothing--even if he'd won everything he would have had no more than cheap T-shirts and tacky mirrors--at all the games that touted "everyone's a winner here," and dropping and breaking the bottle of "sand art"

he'd made to take home to Mindy, he headed resolutely for the merry-go-round.

Bob loved the merry-go-round. Glad to see other adults scattered among the children, he quickly headed for a horse that was the spitting image of Topper, Hopalong Cassidy's horse. Bob loved to ride the horses. Mindy, when she would condescend to ride the merry-go-round at all, would only ride in one of the seats, and made Bob sit with her. "I'm not going to appear to be by myself on a child's ride," she would say.

Bob was ecstatic when he saw that this carousel had brass rings. At quadrants around the ride the rubber rod held the brass rings, and if he reached out from the horse, and collected four of these rings, he would win a free ride. Bob was determined to win another ride.

As the ride gained speed, Bob started his knightly quest on his garish, wooden steed. In his mind, the brass rings became gold and were to be collected for the hand of fair maiden. At the first three stations he succeeded in garnering these circles of chivalry. At the third, which was one-hundred-eighty-degrees from the first, he over-extended himself, tumbled off of his horse, felt as if he hit his head, and, after tumbling along the ground, rolled in a heap at the feet of the kindly-looking guess-your-age-and-weight carny.

"Well it didn't take you long to get back here, Bob," the carny said, brushing the dust off Bob's back. "Are you alright?"

"Seemed to have bumped my head, but I guess I'm alright. How'd you know my name? Oh, yeah, when I showed you my driver's licence. Good memory."

"Are you ready to play my little game again, Bob?"

"I told you I wouldn't. You know all about me, now."

"Yes, Bob, I do. So, why don't you go ahead and play the games again. Maybe that little bump on your head changed your luck. When you're ready for me to tell your age, weight, and future, come back."

"I'm not that stupid. What time is it? My wife is supposed to pick me up at eleven. Is it close?"

"You're on the backside, now, Bob. Time doesn't count anymore."

"The backside? The backside of what, the moon?"

"No, Bob, the backside of the Merry-Go-Round."

"You're nuts," Bob blurted. "Crazy."

"Go play the games, Bob. And when you're ready, when it's time, come see me. I have some things you need to know."

Bob, in his hurry to get away from this idiot, almost knocked the old man down. "I didn't mean to run into you, just away from you. Are you alright?"

"Sure, Bob. I'm fine. Take more than a little bump to hurt an old Arkansas boy."

Bob, as he turned to leave, was struck with the knowledge that the old man looked familiar. He started to ask him where he knew him from, but he was gone, and another carny was working the game.

After calming down, Bob looked at his wrist, at the cheap Timex he'd bought at WalMart, and saw the crystal broken and pushed into the hands, stopping their movement. "Damn," he muttered. "Mindy's supposed to be here at the merry-go-round at eleven, and I won't know when that is."

Walking around, he couldn't help noticing the friendly smiles on the people who worked the carnival. I'll just keep walking around the carnival and, sooner or later, Mindy'll be at the merry-go-round, he thought to himself. "But first," he said aloud, "I'm going to play some of the games."

Walking up to the dart game, "How much for how many darts?"

"It'll cost you a dollar for all the darts you want to throw, Bob," was the reply.

"How did you know my name? It seems as if everybody knows my name. Did the guy at the guess-your-weight booth tell you? That's it, isn't it?"

"Sure, Bob," handing him a handful of darts. "All of us Associates try to be friendly. That's the way the owner wants it. Are you ready to throw? Then let 'er rip."

Bob couldn't believe his luck. He won a major prize with every dart. He won nine mirrors with pictures of WalMart Super Centers on them. And his luck held at "knock-down-the-cats where he couldn't miss and, for prizes, won *Value Brand* groceries.

Reed Saint James slacks were the prize he won at the Fish Pond and, at the Arcade, gift certificates for tire

rotations and oil changes good at all WalMart Super Centers were his for the taking. Bob knew something was different, but in his mind this was heaven: all the goods of a beneficent WalMart at his second favorite wonderland, a carnival.

Men's Athletics jerseys, *Spalding* sporting goods and *Fruit of The Loom* underwear and T-shirts were piled upon him at the Shooting Gallery. He couldn't lose and the prizes were Manna from the Mega-Mart.

Bob knew there was some glitch in the space\time continuum and, that whatever this "Backside of the Merry-go-Round" was, it could substitute for heaven. But the prize that would send him over the edge was waiting for him at the Plate Break.

"Break one plate, Bob," the barker purred and the grand prize is yours." Taking the softball in his hand Bob marvelled at how big it felt: like a beachball, he knew he would break half a dozen plates with one throw. Closing his eyes, he carelessly, almost as an afterthought, tossed the ball at the row of plates and was instantly gratified by the sound of breaking china. When he opened his eyes the barker was handing him a life-size picture of an elderly man.

"What do I need with a picture of the guy that runs the age-weight booth?" he asked.

"This isn't just a picture of him. This is a portrait of the Head Associate: this is Sam Walton."

Bob's head was spinning. The old man that ran that age-weight game was the richest man in America. He was the

founder of the chain store that gave Bob so much pleasure. Bob's mantra was: *In Super Center did Sam Walton, A Discount Paradise Decree.* He'd heard that Sam dressed like anybody else, and would show up at any one of his stores, driving his old pick-up truck, anytime he took a notion. But, wait a minute. Wasn't he dead? How could he have been talking to a dead Sam Walton? Wait. What was it he said he would do? Tell my age, weight, and *future*?"

Bob tore off toward the age-weight booth. When he arrived, the old man--or maybe, he thought, I'd better call him Mister Walton--was just finishing up with a customer who looked at Bob and said, "Sam told me I'd own my own business before I was thirty. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Yeah, great. Now get the hell out of my way."

Standing in front of the man, Bob felt disbelief with a strong undercurrent of awe. "Are you really Sam Walton?" he asked. "The Sam Walton? The 'Walmart' Sam Walton? And if you are, why aren't you dead?"

"Easy, Bob," the old man said. There's plenty of time and the answer to all of your questions is 'yes.' I am all those Waltons, and, yes, I'm dead."

"But how are you here, then?"

"The same way you are, Bob. This is the backside of the Merry-Go-Round, Bob, and everything is possible for those who appreciate the Associates. Not everyone can arrive here. Many resent me and the way I did business. All I wanted to do was give the working people of this country a choice they could afford, and make a few hundred

million dollars along the way. Thanks to people like you, I succeeded. The Backside of the Merry-Go-Round is for you. And thank you for shopping Walmart."

"But my future," Bob asked. "You said you had some things I should know. What are they, Mr. Walton?"

"Please, please, call me Sam. You have a wonderful future, Bob. You and your wife will live and prosper to a ripe old age. I won't tell you how long . . . makes that next-to-last-day rough. Mindy, on a whim, will buy a lottery ticket. Nothing big you see, a few hundred thousand, but with astute investment, you two will retire early--you from your job as Fire Chief and her from her own insurance agency. You'll dabble in real estate, and, believe it or not, Mindy will take an urge to sell Mary Kay cosmetics and will quit thinking that the people who buy clothes from my stores are the great unwashed.. But the best lies in store for your children. . . ."

"Wait a minute you old fraud. I don't have any children. This is bullshit, and I caught you. . . ."

"Please, Bob, don't interrupt. As of this minute you do not have any children. But for the past twenty-seven hours, Mindy has been pregnant. Do you want to know the sex? A boy, the first child is a boy."

"If there's a first, that means there must be another, right? That means at least two, right?" Bob said, the excitement in his voice growing. I'm going to be a father at least twice. Hooray for our side! Somebody to play with. I'm gonna be a daddy!"

"One of your children will grow up to be a United States Senator, and the other will manage the biggest WalMart ever built. Doesn't that make you proud, Bob? Glad to be an American able to buy American whenever the price permits? Come on, Associates. Let's give a cheer for a great man, a great American. Bob! Bob! Bob! Bob. . . ."

"Bob, honey Please, wake up. Bob, this is Mindy please, honey, wake up."

As he came to, Bob saw his wife in the halo from the light over the table in the Emergency Room. It gave Mindy an angelic aura.

"What happened," he asked, wincing from the pain in his head. "Where am I?"

"Listen to me, Bob," Mindy said in slow tones. " You fell off the damned merry-go-round onto your head. You're in the E.R. at Greenwood Hospital. You've had a slight concussion, but you'll be alright. In fact, the doctor said that all that green plaster he had to pull out of your butt gave him a bigger job than the concussion. As soon as he comes back down, he'll sign you out and I'll take you home."

"That was my Ninja Turtle prize."

"Ninja Turtle?"

"Yeah, a turtle. Are all of my other prizes here? My slacks and shirts? What about my mirrors? I really wanted them."

"Bob, you didn't have any prizes. You never win at those games."

"But, Mindy, you don't know where I've been. You don't

know what I learned. We got to make plans."

As Bob looked at Mindy, he knew that it would be no use telling her what he'd learned. In fact, he was about half afraid she'd have him committed. So he did the best he could and had her make him a promise: "Mindy, promise that on the way home we can stop at WalMart? Please, Mindy, please?"

"What on earth do you want at WalMart?"

"Well, I thought maybe you'd want to look at some baby stuff: clothes, crib, that kind of stuff."

"Baby stuff? Are you nuts? That fall must have knocked you loopier than the Doctor thought. Here he comes now."

"Hello, Mr. Ellison. Good to see you looking so chipper. Concussions can be nasty, but your's was minor, and other than a headache, you should be fine. I'll write you a prescription for the headache, and I don't want you working until your family doctor okays it. Here's the prescription and take it easy."

"Thanks Doc. By the way, what's your name?"

"Don't laugh, but it's Scholl, Doctor Scholl."

Bob looked at Mindy and they both broke out in laughter at the same time. Not one to let an opportunity to press his case slip by, Bob asked Mindy, "If our first child is a boy, would it be alright if we named him Sam?"

Remember The Sabbath Day

Sunday, March 6, 1864

Dawn

"Paw," Emmett Gregory shouted as he ran toward the house from the barn. "Paw, they's a rider coming up the Bald."

Russell Gregory was instantly filled with dread. The Tennessee Smokies in general, and this bald that bore his name in particular, didn't see many riders.

The last rider brought news that his oldest son, Ransom, had been grievously wounded at Cold Harbor. This damn war had already torn his community apart--eastern Tennessee was staunchly pro-Union and to the rest of the state no better than a nest of vipers--and, now, it seemed to have taken a fascination with destroying his family. His second son, and sixth of eleven children, Malcolm, was with Sheridan, and youngest son, and youngest child, Emmett, is determined to go in another year when he turned seventeen.

Wiping the lather from his long, Old Testament-stern face with a handful of his shirttail, he walked over, pulled open the door, and was almost knocked over by his out-of-breath-son. "Damnation, Emmett, will you please slow down? Have you put name to our early morning visitor yet?"

"Russell, what's the commotion?" came from the bedroom.

"Emmett seen a rider comin' up the bald, Tildy. Should be here about now. Stay inside until I see who it be." Matilda, had been married to Russell since 1835 and, thirty years later, she weighed the same in body but her heart was pounds heavier. The life in a dog-run cabin, in the middle of a bald, high in the Smoky Mountains was hard on a woman to begin with, but, when Russell Gregory was added to the equation, hard was effected exponentially.

Russell, at thirty-five years of age, had come up to this bald, a grassy meadow up around the tree line, sometime around 1830, bringing nothing with him but an iron determination to live his life by his own dictate, and a stud Morgan horse and a deep-chested mare. Before he built the cabin, he built a corral and barn for the horses, living for two years in the barn with his growing herd. Before long, he was turning out stock that was known and prized all over Tennessee, eastern Kentucky, and across the mountains in North Carolina. His horses were possessed of a phenomenal endurance and would still be travelling when other horses had blown. Russell believed it was the mountain elevation that caused his horses to have great lung capacity and that his love for them was the cause of their great heart.

Tildy always believed that Russell chose her for her bloodline. Tall, angular, and plain, she couldn't understand what Russell had seen in her when his affluence should have given him admission to the finest parlors of Knoxville instead of the front room of a Nashville farrier.

She was a blacksmith's daughter and, being the oldest, was surrogate mother to her father's younger children. At twenty, she was slightly stooped from her labor, and had the red hands of a much older woman--hands that came from washing clothes for nine people. If Russell did choose her for her proven record of work, like he would select a brood mare, then he treated her like he would his breeding stock: he kept her inseminated and he supplied her with everything she could want or need to keep him and, eventually, their sons and daughters in bed and board. When she first saw his cabin on the mountain, she told him she wouldn't live there until he put in windows: he sent to Nashville for the glass and put one window in every side of the cabin.

Thirty years and eleven children later, her life should be easier, but this hellish war had torn them apart physically and emotionally. And with the North Carolina side of the mountains being rife with rebel activity, they had to lock the doors at night. Now, every night-bark of a hound was investigated at gunpoint.

"It's Ephraim Dowell, Paw," Emmett gulped. "And I don't think he's alone. Somebody's traveling with him but a ways behind."

Ephraim Dowell was the oldest person living in Cades Cove, an early settlement of Scots and Scots-Irish at the base of the mountains. Russell was seventy, but Ephraim was ten years older and had fought with Jackson at New Orleans, where he had been promoted to Colonel. He still demanded to be addressed as such.

Walking out on the short porch, Russell greeted Dowell, "Morning, Colonel. You got to ride up a mountain to get your exercise?"

"Morning, Russell. It's never just exercise coming up to see you and Tildy. But as much a pleasure as it is to see you, it's business that brings me to Gregory's Bald this time."

"Get off your horse and come in the house. Business, though unexpected and welcome, is not to be done on the Lord's Day. I won't sell horseflesh on the Sabbath."

"Russell, I have a stock buyer for the Union Army with me. Will he be welcome in your house?"

"Ephraim, you've brought the war to my door."

"We've damn near won the war, Russell. God has seen fit to preserve the Union and destroy the abomination of slavery. But He couldn't do it alone. The grip of Satan was on this land, and it took the blood of thousands of righteous warriors in His cause to bring about this victory. You must do your part."

"I will not sell one head of horse to the Union Army, the Rebel army, or God Himself's Army. As for my part, I've got two of my three sons fighting for the Union cause. One of them'll live the rest of his life with no legs and his wife and children will have to depend upon me for their care. I'm seventy. How much longer can I take care of them, Ephraim?"

"The country needs your horses, Russell, like it needed your sons. You couldn't deny the army dumb brutes and yet

still sleep comfortable knowing you'd sent your sons. At least talk to the stock buyer."

"No, by God, I won't. My family is going down to the Cove to church. You're welcome to stay, Ephraim, eat with us and ride to services in the carriage with us. But that stock buyer had better be off my land before I leave for church, because if I meet him on my land I'll take a horse whip to him."

"The Lord detests a prideful man, Russell. Be careful that God does not become jealous at your lack of care for His cause and strike you down. Give my kindest to Tildy, and, if you deem me worthy, I'll see you in church."

5:00 P.M.

"Weldon, I swear to God I couldn't help it. I had to shoot him. I thought the Yankee bastard was reachin' for a gun. I didn't have no other way out, so I shot him fore he could do the same to me."

"Coley, this is behavior I won't tolerate. You did the same at Millville, and you beat that storekeeper senseless at Highview. We're raiders, not bushwhackers, not irregulars. We have authority from General Lee himself to scout and disrupt communications lines and rail service. We're to, and Coley, this is word for word what our orders state, help in the replenishment of horse, lead, powder, and any other legitimate spoils of war garnered from the enemy or his sympathizer. We do not rape, pillage or murder. If this happens again, Coley, I'll drumhead court martial you,

and if a firing squad is deemed proper punishment, you being my brother won't save you. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sure, Weldon."

Yelling at the top of his voice, "You will address me as Captain Shelby from this day forward, do you understand me?

If so, get out of my sight and stay out of it."

Weldon Shelby, Captain, Miller's Fifth Horse, Army of the Confederacy, was tired. Instead of the lightning reconnaissance and raids of the early part of the war, he was now reduced to no more than a freebooter. No matter how many authorizations he had, he knew that what he was taking from the people of east Tennessee was little better than what Quantrill was doing. Now his own brother, Coleridge was becoming an uncontrollable force. Many of the men wanted to take after Coley, and who could blame them? Coley was quick with a joke, a smoke, a drink or a lark, and the next time he felt fear would be his first.

So Weldon Shelby was tired. The unrelenting war was taking a toll on his mind as well as his body. Sometimes, especially in the early morning, he would start to shake, knowing that today would be the day he would die. By noon he was welcoming that death and the release it would bring. Twenty-five, he looked forty, and his hair was rat-gray at the sides. Every time he used the remnant of a comb he carried, handfuls of the dry-grass hair would be combed out. Coley laughed and said that the only good that comb did was to keep the lice from getting too comfortable in one

spot. They were all plagued with lice, and there wasn't three tight teeth in the troop: forty-four men, most of whom had been together for at least two years. They were a tight unit, but he felt he could no longer control them. He was afraid they would sense his indecision, his fear, and when he needed them, or more importantly, when they needed him, the distrust would get them all killed or captured. A great many Confederate Raiders and Irregulars had been summarily hung as horse thieves.

"Cap'n Shelby, sir? The scouts is coming back in now. You want to meet them, or you want me to send them to you?"

"I'll meet them, Sergeant. Have the ones on cook duty stir up a fire, and send some grub and coffee to me for them. It's cloudy and almost dark, pickets should be working their way to their positions. Set them, and then pass the word to the rest of the men that they've been posted early and to not wander in the woods to relieve themselves."

"Yes, sir, Cap'n. Right away."

"Cap'n," Morgan Beecher almost crowed. "You'll not be able to guess where me and Fitch have been."

"I hope it was to scout the area I told you to," Shelby said with a hint of mirth in his voice. Morgan Beecher was one step removed from an idiot, but, when it came to reconnaissance, he was a marvel. His intellectual deficiency left him with little usable imagination, so his recon reports were just exactly what had been there, without subjection or exaggeration. Beecher, tall, emaciated, and

loyal to Shelby the way his coonhounds were loyal, was dancing in anticipation to tell what he had discovered.

"Cap'n, me and Fitch have been to church. Yessir, to church. The Cades Cove Primitive Baptist Church. We was riding along this road when we heard riders approaching us from the rear. Well, Cap, we got ourselves overtook fore we could get off the road. It was a carriage, and it was busting wide open with the prettiest girls we ever did see. When we stopped to tip our hats, one of 'em, the one that had eyes for me. . . ."

"That's a dang lie, Morgan," Fitch objected. That gal was itching herself raw with the want of me, and you know it."

Shelby knew this was a game between the two scouts: Fitch was probably the happiest married man Shelby had ever met. He was always writing letters to his wife and three children at home in Alabama: letters with little chance of being delivered with so many towns and rail depots being under Union control. Fitch was one of the few men in the troop who was not from Tennessee or North Carolina.

"Well, sir. like I was saying before Fitch started telling that bedtime story, we went to church with these women and it turned into the dangdest service I ever seen. The preacher started off by talking about the Christian's responsibility to others, and before he could finish the parable about the rich man, the needle, and the camel, this old, dried up poof--musta been some old veteran, they was calling him Colonel and all--stands up and says that in

their very midsts they was a rich man who would not do his duty to his country so they could finish fighting God's righteous war. Well, when they got to the war part, me and old Fitch started looking for a window, seeing as how they was all east Tennessee sympathizers, but then Cap--and this is the real important part so listen real close--this other old fella, himself looking like the judgement of God, stands up and shouts down the other old man and says: 'If selling my horses to either side in this damn war'--yessir, Cap, said damn right in church--'was what it took for me to gain the Kingdom of Heaven,' then he'd guess he'd roast in hell for eternity."

"Cap'n," said Fitch. "We asked what that was all about and it seems that this old man, Russell Gregory is his name, raises about a hunderd head of the finest Tennessee Walking horse in the whole blessed state. Lives up on the mountaintop, in a meadow that these people around here call a bald. Seems he supports the Union cause, but he don't want his horses in the war."

Beecher took up his story again, "We followed this fella, and when we got close to his place, we hid in the woods until they all got settled in to their Sunday dinner. We snooped around and, sure enough, what they say is so: he's got about a hunderd head of prime horse, just ripe for the taking. Ain't nobody around except him and his old woman; a sprout of a boy, fifteen, maybe sixteen, and two old men looking to be in their fifties that tend the place. They was all we seen in four hours. We can have them

horses, and be back in North Calincky, fore anybody hears about them being gone."

Shelby called his officers together, made sure they understood the mission and the part each and his men would play. As his brother left the tent, Shelby called him back and said, "Coley, remember what I told you. Horses and provisions for them and the men are all we're after."

"Yes, sir, Captain Shelby, I understand.

A chill took him, gooseflesh covered him. "I don't like this," Shelby thought aloud.

8:45 P.M.

"Russell," Tildy said, her voice full of concern. "I don't like it when Emmett is alone on the mountain at night. Especially when he has that rifle."

"Hush now, Tildy. That boy is as at home on the mountain as you are in the kitchen. He wanted to tree a bear with that new hound. Time for that is past. I expect he'll be heading home for long, if he's not now."

"Russell, why won't you sell stock to the cavalry? It's honest and we do support the Union cause. I've seen you sell horse to gamblers, adulterers, and Lord knows what. Why them and not Mr. Lincoln's soldiers?"

"I have sold horse to the sort of people you mentioned. But they were men I felt would appreciate good horseflesh the same as I do. Have you any idea what happens to a horse when the cavalry gets hold of it, Tildy? It's quick broke, saddle-galled, run to death, under fed, seldom walked to

cool, and then it's shot for breaking down. And that's in ever day use. In a war all that's magnified like you don't want to hear. You heard what a cannon ball did to one of your children. You can imagine that a wounded horse won't get the same consideration that Ransom did."

"But, Russell, you sent two of your sons to the war and if it ain't over quick a third is raring to go."

"First, it was Ephraim Dowell. Now, you accuse me of that. What son did I send to war? What son did I even say could go? Ransom and Malcolm came over here and told me, *told me*, understand, that they were going to join the Union Army as soon as the crops were in spring of the year the war started. They didn't ask if they could go, nor did they seek my blessing. I had no chance to allow or disallow. Now, how do you get I sent them boys to war? I hate this damn war, and everything it's being fought over. . . ."

Every dog on the place started barking, the shouts of men and the sound of horses, many horses, were heard inside the cabin.

9:00 P.M.

Emmett heard the commotion as he neared the farm, but unlike himself, instead of galloping headlong toward it, he walked slowly and quietly to the house. The yard was full of horses and men, and from the mix of field gray and butternut of their clothing, he knew they were rebels. He also knew that his paw was about to lose every head of horse on the farm. Men were running in and out of the buildings, carrying chickens, live pigs, cured meat from the

smokehouse, and even hands of tobacco from the tobacco barn. Others were tying the horses together into small groups, making it easier to travel them. And some were filling grass sacks with corn and oats. Emmett crouched at the base of a tall pine tree and cradled the rifle in his lap.

Inside the house, Shelby introduced himself to Russell and Tildy. "Mr. Gregory, Mam, I won't have you tied if you give me your word that you won't try to harm my men. All we want are the horses and foodstuff. I give you my word. Agreed?"

Russell was livid with rage. "I spit on the word of such as you. Freebooting damned rebel bushwhackers. If I could get my hands on a weapon you'd have to kill me. I swear by my God."

"There won't be anyone harmed, much less killed. So why don't you sit at the table and we'll be away from here shortly. I'll leave one horse. I won't see you stranded on this mountain. It'll probably snow before morning, sir. Your foodstuff will be depleted, but I consider east Tennessee to be hostile territory so it's spoils of war."

"Weldon, come out here and look at what I found in the barn," Coley yelled from the porch. As Shelby walked out the door, the old man was right behind him.

"There must be four, five hundred dollars in here," Coley pointed to the floor of the porch. "And look, likker, a whole damn jug."

Weldon looked down to see a brass bound box almost full of pre-war gold. "Keep the likker, Coley, but we're not

thieves. Mr. Gregory can keep his money."

Coley looked at his brother in disbelief. "The men won't stand for this, Weldon. Two, three years we've followed you. You with your old-maid ways. You with your sanctimonious preaching. I'm not gonna go home from this war with nothing. Not when this old Yankee bastard has provided me with an alternative."

Hearing himself called a bastard snapped something in the old man. Snatching a bridle from a peg on the porch, he swung it in a powerful arc, catching Coley in the mouth with the heavy bit. Coley screamed in rage and pulled his pistol from its holster while blood spewed from his mouth.

Weldon saw the maniacal rage on his brother's face pulled his own pistol from its holster, leveled it at his brother, and shouted, "No, Coley! No more murder. Back off, Coley."

9:15 P.M.

Emmett, after he saw his father swing the bridle at the rebel, picked up his caplock rifle and aimed it toward the house. When he saw two rebels pointing pistols, he sighted on the one facing his father, and squeezed the trigger.

As Coley's finger tightened on the trigger of the heavy pistol, Shelby screamed once more at his brother and while he applied mortal pressure to the trigger of his own weapon, he shouted, "No, more murder." Then he killed his brother.

The two shots were so close together that they melded into one long roar. As the heavy ball of Shelby's pistol

literally picked his brother up and tossed him out of the way, it cleared the way for Emmett's lead ball to smash into the chest of his father, killing him instantly. No one on the porch or in the woods ever realized that Coley's pistol never fired, and that the bullet that killed Russell Gregory, never rifled down its barrel.

The screaming of Tildy, and the noises of Russell's horses, not used to the sound of shots or the smell of powder, unnerved Shelby. He looked at Tildy, and wanted to reach out to her, to comfort her. Yet part of him also wanted to be comforted. The two dead men on the porch were a gulf between them. That the gulf was one of mutual loss didn't matter, it could never be spanned, and any actions on the part of Shelby would be futile. Acting more as a trained cavalry officer than a grieving brother, Shelby marshalled his troop, loaded his brother's body on his horse, and took his men toward the Carolina side of the mountain.

When the dust of the horses settled, Emmett ran to the porch and looked down on the body of his father. The Old Testament quality of his father's face was only magnified by death. Emmett took his mother in his arms and cried, "They murdered him, Ma." I saw them, they just murdered him. I killed the one that killed Paw. I killed him."

Any Day You're Fishing . . .

"Grampa, are you going to die?"

"Yes, Robbie, but not today. Hold your pole still and I'll bait your hook."

"Will I catch a fish this time?"

"I doubt it, but you'll feed him well. Why are you worried about my mortality?"

"Huh?"

"Why are you worried about me dying?"

"Grandma said she'd see you dead before she'd see you in church, and I thought you were dying."

"She might be right, but I'd rather be here with you on a pretty Sunday morning than locked up in church with your Grandma."

"Am I getting a bite?"

"No, Rob, you're jerking your pole around and that's what's making your bobber move."

"Oh, yeah. Why do you whittle? Mamma says it's a habit, and if she was Grammaw she'd make you sweep the shavings off the porch."

"Well, it is a habit, Rob. And I guess I should sweep the shavings off. But your grandmother would sweep the porch every day even if I didn't whittle. And besides, she

sweeps the shavings into the flower beds, so she gets a little good from them too. Whittling gives my hands something to do so my mind can do nothing, and it isn't like I was smoking or chewing tobacco and spitting all over the place or dropping ashes all over the floor. There are good habits, Rob, and you, whittling, and fishing are three of them"

"Is that a snake in the water?"

"No, Rob, it's only a stick. Quit throwing rocks at it or you'll scare away any fish that are still foolish enough to be on this side of the pond. Now, Robbie, I said to quit that."

"Are you getting grumpy now? Grandma said we wouldn't fish an hour and you be as cross as a hair ball of bull snakes."

I think she probably said 'a barrel full of fish hooks.' No, I'm not getting grumpy. Besides, we've been fishing for two, three weeks now. Haven't we?"

"No, Grampa, it's only been about a half hour."

"Oh."

"Why do you wear suspenders? Daddy says it's because your butt has fallen off till it looks like a crack in a board and you can't hold your pants up with a belt."

"Your Daddy takes after his mother, bald spot and all. I don't want to hear you talk like that. Okay?"

"You do. And Daddy does. Grandma says he's just like you."

"Well, he's not. He had smarter kids than I did."

"I think I got a fish, Grampa. I think I got Old Morris."

"Nope, you're tangled up in the cattails again."

"Damn."

"Robert Edward, if I hear you say that word again, I'll feed you to Old Morris."

"Why do you call him Morris? Grandpa Smith says it's because you're too good to have an Old Joe like everybody else. He says you put on airs."

"He probably said 'putting on airs.' It means I act like somebody I'm not. Do you think I do that?"

"Only at Christmas when you dress up like Santa."

"You think that's me? I don't believe in Santa, you know that."

"Yeah, it's probably you. You don't take your hearing aid out."

"If I did, I couldn't hear what you wanted for Christmas."

"So, it is you. I knew it. Teeny owes me a million bucks."

"Let this be our secret. No need for Tina to learn just yet. Wait a few years, then get your money."

"Okay. Will you bait my hook? Will you let me cast? Let me cast this time, Grampa."

No, Rob, I'll cast. I've already dug one hook out of my ear. The next time you might hit a vital organ, and then your question about me dying will be moot."

"Huh?"

"It won't make any difference."

"What won't?"

"Huh?"

"What won't make any difference?"

"Hey, Rob, you're getting a bite. Easy, easy. Damn, Rob, who do you think you are, Lash Larue? Jesus, boy, you damn near got me again."

"You're getting grumpy now."

"Well, Rob, with me grumpy is a survival tool."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that it's time to quit fishing and time to go into town and get an ice cream."

"A real ice cream, or one from the freezer in Maupin's grocery store?"

"We'll go to Dairy Queen, Maupin's is closed on Sunday."

"Can we, maybe stay and fish awhile longer? I won't jerk my line out like I did."

"You mean you'd rather stay here and fish with grumpy old me, than ride into town and get a real ice cream?"

"You're not too grumpy. Will you bait my hook?"

"No, Rob, it's time you baited your own hook. Get a minnow out of the bucket, that's it. Now slip the hook under the back fin. Whoops, too deep. Get another one. Try it, real slow. That's it, Rob. Now let me put this irresistible little morsel into the pond, and maybe we can entice Old Morris to dinner."

"How big is Old Morris, Grampa? Fifty, sixty pounds I

bet."

"Just a little smaller, Rob. I was talking to him the other day, asking him about his wife and kids and all, and he told me he was up to nine pounds now."

"Oh, Grampa, fish don't talk."

"Well, maybe not. But I know a little boy that's getting a bite. Take it easy, let him take it. Slow. Slow. Now, set the hook. Good boy, Robbie. Keep the tip of your rod up. Reel him in slow; don't horse him, Rob. That's the way."

"Is it Old Morris, Grampa? Did I catch him? Did I?"

"That's probably one of his grand kids. He's a mite small to be Morris."

"Wow, I caught a fish. I baited the hook and reeled him in. Wait till I tell Teeny. She'll shit. Oops, I'm sorry Grampa."

"How old are you now, Rob? Twenty-three?"

"No, Grampa, I'm ten. You know that."

"I couldn't tell by the way you talk. Don't let your grandma hear you cuss, or I'll be the one catching the devil. Where do you hear language like that?"

"At school, mostly. And Daddy, some. But mostly at school."

"Who talks that way at school, the teachers?"

"No, silly, the kids. Did you like school, Grampa?"

"Yes I did, Rob. I especially liked college, and I hope you will too. Your father was a good student, Rob, and he has a very good job. I'm proud of him. The only part of

your father's job I don't like is that it takes you so far from me. Rob, you're getting another bite. See if you can land this one without the expletives."

"Huh?"

"The cuss words, Robbie."

"Oh. Grampa, how did the fish get in this pond?"

"I'll ask Old Morris the next time we talk. Okay?"

Say, Robbie, did I ever tell you about the time I took your daddy fishing?"

"Nope, Daddy doesn't like to fish."

"Rob, I think your dad just says that because he doesn't have time to fish. Fishing seems to best suit old men and young boys."

"Like us?"

"Hmph, like one of us, anyway. Your daddy was about your age, and my brother, Edward--the one you get your middle name from--gave him a rod and reel for his birthday. He just wouldn't let me rest until I took him fishing. I told him that I'd take him Sunday, and that set your Grandmother off. 'That boy needs to be in church on Sunday. He'll learn things there that will serve him in this world and the next,' she told me. Well, I told her that I didn't have time to go on any other day, and I'd try not to corrupt him this one time. Well, Robbie, I brought him down here--yes this very spot--and he acted just about like you: throwing rocks, making noise, making me dodge flying fish hooks, and every now and then, he'd catch a fish. No, he didn't catch Old Morris. Old Morris was just a minnow then.

After a while your daddy got real quiet and for the longest time he sat and stared at his bobber. I could tell that he was deep in thought so I didn't say anything, and after a while he started asking me questions.

"'Daddy,' he asked, 'does Mother fish?' No I said, she won't entertain the notion. 'Then she doesn't know about this does she?' About what, I asked? 'About God,' your daddy said. I told him that his mother probably knew more about God than any other three people on earth, and he looked at me and said: 'Does she know that God talks to little boys while they're fishing?' Robbie, I was dumbfounded. I asked him what he meant, and this is what he told me.

"'All of a sudden, Dad, I could hear the birds singing, and the crickets chirping, and I could hear the frogs, and the water looked like a big green mirror. I felt like I do right before I fall asleep: real warm and soft. Then a voice inside my head was telling me that this was good. That this was right. That it didn't matter that it was Sunday, that it was okay. I thought it was you, but you were asleep. I hoped that I *wouldn't* catch a fish, because I didn't want anything to stop the way I was feeling. It had to be God, didn't it Dad? He must talk to little boys while they're fishing.'"

"Was it really God, Grampa? Was it?"

"I don't know, Rob, but your daddy thinks it was, so it probably was."

"Do you think he'll talk to me while I fish?"

"I think he probably has, Rob."

"When? Today?"

"Yes, Rob, today. Think about it. See if you can figure when it was."

"Grampa, was it when I wanted to stay instead of leaving to get an ice cream?"

"You're a real smart boy, Rob. Why did you want to stay? You weren't catching any fish."

"Because I didn't want to leave the pond. It's real pretty here. Quiet. The sky is so blue, and the cattails are moving in the breeze, it seemed stupid to leave. It's just that I wanted to stay **here**. It just seems like this is a special place, almost like magic. Is that God talking to me?"

"I think it is, Rob. Get me your pole, and I'll teach you to cast. Okay?"

"Hell, yes! Oops, sorry Grampa, it slipped."

"What am I going to do with you Robert Edward?"

"The next time I come here will you take me fishing again?"

"Yes, Rob, it'll be a pleasure. But you're going to have to work on that mouth of yours. Okay?"

"Sure thing, Grampa."

A Measure of Days

It was a misty, moisty morning. A cold, miserable day, with the air so full of water it couldn't fall, wouldn't make a puddle bounce. If you stuck your head outside it would feel dry, but if you had to be outside for an hour, you'd be soaked to the skin.

The dawn air was blue with the hickory-sweet smoke from the cabin's wattle-and-daub flue. It was little different from any of the others in this holler: two-roomed, squared log, with a dog-run connecting the two rooms. But this cabin had windows, real glass windows, all the way around, all the way from Nashville.

The house-yard showed the effect of a man that takes pride in what he has. A well-kept split-rail fence surrounded the acre of grass, flower beds, and rhododendron. And off to the west side of the cabin stood an orchard with regimental rows of Arkansas Red apple trees.

Directly behind the cabin, at a comfortable distance, stood the outhouse, and parallel rows of split hickory wood. The outhouse was just comfortably far enough away not to offend, and the wood rick was just comfortably close enough that the old man could gather his wood without becoming chilled.

The plowed-under remnant of a house garden was visible,

and a homemade swing hung from the stoutest branch of a withered, gnarled hedgewood tree. Below, and in the seat of the swing, lay the neon-green hedge apples that were the only sign of disorder on the homestead. The old man would gather up an armful and scatter them in the dark corners of his cabin, fervent in the belief that hedge apples repelled spiders.

The barnyard and outbuildings were testament to a time when a man knew where to put his money. With stone foundations and walls boxed with mill sawn oak, the smallest of the out buildings would have swallowed the cabin. The feed barn contained a horse stable, milk parlor, hen house and brooder, and one long side was a tool shed with one end boxed off into a small carpentry shop. The other buildings were corncribs, tobacco barn, smokehouse, springhouse, and a washhouse with stone wash troughs. At one time this was a self-sufficient enterprise. Now the old man felt he was more of a caretaker to a memory than husbandman of a working farm.

Inside the cabin, in the room that served as kitchen, dining room, and living room, the light of a coal oil lamp was about to win out over the light and heat of the fireplace. The old man sat in a chair at one end of a plank-and-trestle table, staring at the chair at the far end. These were the only chairs in the room; benches stood at the two long sides of the table.

The man stirred himself and got up one joint at a time, in the manner of old men, and walked to the wood box beside

the fireplace.

"Damn this miser weather," he thought, as he gazed out a window, watching the smoke hang on the mist. "It's too cheap to rain, and too tight to snow."

Picking up three pieces of thin-split hickory, he teased the fire back to life, and walked to the door. Taking a heavy woolen sweater off one of the pegs beside the door, he opened the door and stepped down onto the dog-run.

The man was long, not as much tall as long; with long legs that seemed to start at his armpits, with hands that nearly brushed his knees. He slipped his sweater over a blue chambray work shirt, buttoned at both the collar and wrists, neatly tucked into a pair of heavy corded gray trousers--one size too large--and these were held in place by a wide pair of galluses. The only jewelry the man wore (and he would have argued about whether or not it was jewelry) was a pocket watch secured to a belt loop by a woven brown hair fob.

The old man reached into a shirt pocket and brought out the makings for a smoke. With a dexterity that belied the arthritic condition of his hands, he soon had a cigarette rolled. Taking a kitchen match from the bowels of a pocket, he flicked a hard, horn-like, yellowed thumbnail across the head, exploding it into life, and when the sulphur burned away, applied it to the cigarette.

Flicking the match away, and expelling the tobacco smoke into the air to mingle with the wood smoke, he made a noise that was given birth in his throat but died at the

backside of his teeth. His few friends would have called it a chuckle, but to the stranger it would sound like a grunt. "She's been dead thirty years," he thought, "and I still won't smoke in the house. Damned funny business when you think of it."

"I'm not fool enough to think that it'll change you," she'd explained, "Nor will I forbid you to have an occasional drink, or the pleasure of your smoke. But you will never have neither in any house where I lay my head."

Raising a fine, almost delicately shaped head to the ridge, he gazed at the contrast of leaden sky and the wet-black, leafless branches of the trees on the hills. This starkness so many people found depressing he appreciated and admired. He saw as much beauty in the monochromatic bareness as other people saw in the October splendor of the woods.

Feeling something brush his pantsleg, he looked down at a very old, very pregnant, Redbone coonhound.

"You hussy," he growled. "I figured you was over that nonsense. Any idee as to who the proud papa is? I didn't figure they was another dog in smellin' distance. Maybe it was that ol' boar coon you been a chasin'. If it was I'll have me some real honest-to-God coon-hounds." He looked down at the dog. "I guess we're the only two left in this holler," he said, "Didn't used to be that way, though. Eight, maybe ten families used to share this end of the holler. Just about used up all the flat land that wasn't more rock than dirt. And some set up hillside farmin'. And

some said to hell with farmin' and just hunted and trapped." Reaching down to scratch the dog's ear was more painful to the man than it was pleasing to the hound, so he took the toe of his shoe and gently rubbed it back and forth along the dog's back. "What corn they needed to feed their families on they traded deer meat or swapped out work for. And back then they wasn't too big a stink raised if some filled out an empty purse or their children's bellies with a little whisky makin'; a feller would advance a right smart corn to an enterprisin' man that kept a good still, and besides making a good return on his corn, he was guaranteed a good sip of likker when the need was nigh. Wouldn't be nothin shameful or sinful about it neither. Them as had land farmed. Them as didn't, stilled. It was all honest work."

Reaching back inside the cabin, he took a worn felt hat off of the peg, placed it squarely upon his head and gently pulled the door closed behind him.

"C'mon, Jupe, let's go," he said to the hound. With the hound at his heels he headed down toward the gate.

One quarter of a mile from the house was the cemetery. He stopped and stood at the arched entry constructed from field stone from the farm. He knew what was on the other side of the lattice-work gate--it was like looking through a window to the little future he had left. Things don't change much in a cemetery, especially a small family plot such as this one, and he would never see the last change this one would undergo.

Much in the way the winter woods gave him a sense of beauty, the cemetery, especially on as raw day as this one, gave him a sense of peace. The old man, being alone, had no one to talk to except the hound, so he would visit the cemetery for company. He was not one to talk to graves. Some would say he was not one to talk to people that much. But when he came here, the memories were like tacit conversation.

His great-grand and grandparents were buried here, along with his brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. All of his children--all five of them, three boys and two girls, the victims of illness, accident, and one murder--were laid to rest beside his wife. Sometimes he felt he was a victim of the unnatural and the unreasonable; the most unnatural act in creation is for a man to outlive his children, and he felt that it was unreasonable for him to be alive and them to be dead all these years. For the last fifty years, as the cemetery became more inhabited with each passing, his life had become more empty.

After carrying away some downed tree branches, his knees were reminding him that he still had a quarter of a mile walk back to his house and his dinner. He whistled up the hound, and when she was standing beside him he looked down at her and said, "Ya' know, Jupe, the hard part of gettin' old, at least gettin' to be as old as I am, ain't the aches and pains. It's the lonely. Anyone that ever loved me, or anyone that I ever loved in this whole wide world, is buried here. I don't have anyone to love or to be

loved by. That's the hard part. C'mon, let's us go fix a little dinner."

As he neared the house, he stopped at the gate and thought of her. "She wanted an iron gate, but I told her that iron gates was for prisons and graveyards, and a wooden one would do just fine."

After closing the gate, he turned toward the cabin and noticed the windows. Most of the cabins in the holler had isinglass and some just had wooden shutters that closed over square holes in the walls, but his great-grandmother had made windows a stipulation of matrimony: "I won't marry you in the dark, and I won't live in the dark, and I won't raise childern that squinch up their eyes from cradle to grave. If you want the toil of my hands and your pleasure in my bed, you'll put at least one window in every side of that dog-run cabin."

"Ol' Pap said it seemed a good bargain," he remembered aloud. "Must have been. The cemetery's crowded with his eleven childern."

The glass in the windows, at least what was left of the original "Nashville" glass, was wavy. On sunny days the windows seemed to be not so much windows but frames for Impressionist paintings. The willow tree outside the bedroom took on a soft, wavy appearance: clear, but distorted enough to lead the viewer to believe that he might be seeing a willow tree. This view always amused him, even though he'd seen it all his life.

She'd loved the windows and she kept them spotless.

She'd kept him busy making window boxes, whitewashing them, and then, every spring, going to get a small wagon load of wood's dirt so she could plant all of the colorful summer flowers she'd loved so much. It had always tickled him because every winter she'd take the seed catalogue and make out her order, and then talk about how pretty the flowers would be. He told her that she was talking them flowers to death, but she said that was all right because flowers that were talked about were almost as pretty as real flowers, and this way she could have flowers in her window boxes all year long.

The windows seemed to reflect the old man: brittle, lucid, with just a touch of dirt in the corners that bespoke more of a futile attempt at sinlessness than an abject lack of Godliness, and through them he'd seen a lot of pain and joy. Through the window in the kitchen he'd seen the snake strike the firstborn. Poor thing lived two hours, and those two hours were an agony. He'd watched the oldest girl discover her shadow from the back window of the bedroom. She'd stop, turn around, put her little hands on her hips, just like her momma did, seeming to dare the thing to follow her again. And when she saw that it appeared to be attached to her, she bent her leg up in back of her and tried to peel it from the sole of her bare foot. The old man made the noise in his throat at the memory.

Stepping into the shelter of the dog-run, he removed his hat, beat the water off it against his leg, and looking down at the hound, thought that the pups would be born soon.

"I'll go in and fix us some dinner now," he explained. "It'll be mush and bacon grease for you again, but the weather'll be cold enough for a hog killin' fore long, and then you can eat cracklin's till you founder."

The kitchen had grown cold, but it was the pervasive dampness that most bothered him. It seemed to filter in through his clothes, into his skin, and then, much in the way water will swell dry wood, cause his joints to become tight and ache. Taking off the damp sweater helped, but it was only when he had the cook stove blazing, and the unrelenting dry heat it exuded chased away the chill and damp, and he'd poured himself a cup of fresh-brewed coffee, that the old man felt well.

Taking down a blackened, cast-iron pot, he walked over to the water bucket and ladled out enough water to make the hound's mush. Hell, he thought, while adding more water, I may as well have mush myself.

In the thirty years since she died, he had barely learned to cook any more than it took to keep himself alive. Fried meat--mostly pork--fried eggs, and potatoes--boiled, baked, or fried--made up his diet. As he had gotten older, the appetite of the hard working man had been replaced by the small-portioned, occasional meal, of the elderly. In the early spring he would literally gorge himself on kale and poke greens, but once his body's craving for them was abated, he would rarely touch them the rest of the summer. He'd store cabbage, carrots, and turnips from the garden, and apples from his orchard in the root cellar, but every

year he'd throw away more than he had eaten.

When the mush was done, he spooned out a small portion into a bowl, and opened a fresh can of evaporated milk, poured some on the mush, and some more into a second cup of coffee. He put the pot on the table so it would cool, and sat down to eat. There's no grace said anymore, he thought. Used to be a meal couldn't start at this table until somebody said a blessing over it. She'd always taken care of the blessings; said the man of the house should say 'em, but since I was a heathen, the food would turn to ash. I swole up and said it sure as hell didn't turn to ash while I was breaking my back to see that there was something to put on the damned table. Then she puffed up and asked me to leave my own table until I could at least act like a gentleman, if not a Christian. Spent that night and the next in the barn. Never spent another night away from her again. Never said grace either. The old man made that noise in his throat.

With his legs and back telling him he'd walked a half-a-mile, he got up from the table in stages. Half walking, and half hopping, he took the tea kettle to the water bucket and ladled out enough water to wash the dishes. After he set the kettle on to heat, he took down a skillet, scooped in a goodly portion of bacon grease from a coffee tin, and set it on a warm lid of the cook stove. Taking down his hat from the peg, he stepped out into the dog-run to hunt up the speckled dish pan that he used to feed the hound. The light was failing now. It darkened early this time of year,

especially in the holler. Staring wistfully toward the ridge, the old man knew the deer would be gathering at the edge of the woods, waiting for a little less light, so they could come down and eat the last of the windfall apples in his orchard. Many was the night he was serenaded by the hound as she would take scent of the deer and then run all night long, baying at the deer she'd spooked from the orchard. "She tries that tonight she'll strew puppies from one end of the holler to the other," he growled.

She'd never understood his love of his hounds, or for that matter, the love of the game they run. Fox, coon, squirrel when the leaves had fallen, all had given him enjoyment. Most times the fox hounds never saw the fox, and the men he hunted with would only shake out enough coons to keep the hounds anxious, and he only let his hounds tree squirrels because he liked a mess of squirrel and dumplings. No, it wasn't the blood, it was the hunt and the fellowship. Hard working, decent men, they had little spare time at all, and none in the planting or harvest season. But after the crops were in, and the land was at rest, they would gather at one another's houses at late afternoon and gathering all of their hounds, head for the hills and streams.

The big fun was in the bragging on the hounds and laughing at one or the other's embarrassment when what had previously been the finest hound, fox or coon, in the country was suddenly transformed into a lying, no good, son-of-a-bitch by an animal a little bit smarter, or more scared. No mercy was shown when this happened, and none was

expected. Sometimes they would hunt all night and get home at dawn to the smell of bacon frying. I can almost smell it now, he thought, bacon frying . . . bacon frying? "Oh, hell," he spat. "The damned bacon grease."

He set the pan of mush in front of the hound, who looked as if food was the least of her concerns. "You'll drop that litter sometimes fore mornin'," he assured her, and then he went back into the darkness of the cabin.

"Ought to wash and polish the globes on these lamps, maybe let a little more light through," he thought. "It ain't bad enough, me damn near settin the place on fire, but the smokin' bacon grease is all over these flues. "She'd have a fit if she was here, what with me livin' this way. Funny, but I don't even think her name anymore, I just think of her or she. She had a beautiful name; gave the same name to the second girl. Buried them the same day, in the same grave, with the same name. She would have appreciated that."

As darkness fell, the old man heard the hound whimper. Taking up one of the lamps, he stepped out on the dog-run. Holding the lamp up high to spread the light, he saw the dog, lying on her side and gasping for breath. As he put out a hand to calm the old dog, she jerked spasmodically, and the life-force left her. "She was just too old to carry and whelp those pups," he said.

He took down a skillet, and, opening the fire-box of the cookstove, scooped out enough coals to fill it. He opened the door, walked across the dog-run, and opened the

door to the bedroom, stepped in, and went to a small, almost miniature coalstove. Raising the lid, he poured in the coals, and, reaching behind the stove to a small box, took out a handful of kindling and dropped it onto the coals. After the kindling took, he fed the fire three or four sticks of cordwood, closed the stove door, and opened the damper. Solidly closing the cabin's door behind him, he walked back to the other room. One night he didn't take that precaution, and a possum, drawn by the heat, crawled into the room. The old man had a hell of a time evicting it, especially when the hound, drawn by the cursing, tried to help in the eviction. As a young, single man, he always shaved once a week, but once he married, she'd asked him to shave before coming to bed. As the water heated for his nightly ritual, he was struck by the thought that no one had seen his face in over six months, but, still, he shaved every night.

Taking out his razor, strop, brush, and a china cup she had given him to hold his soap, he hung the strop on a nail next to the square mirror, and stropped the razor evenly: six times on each side of the blade, on each side of the strop. He then took off the blue shirt, and unbuttoned his long underwear to the waist, slipped out of the arms and let them hang down from the waist of his trousers.

When he had scraped away the last remaining stubble, he wiped the soap residue from his ears, looked in the mirror and saw his face. No man really sees his face while he shaves, so the reflection caught him unawares. His ears had

gotten long. His entire face seemed to be drawn, pinched. The loose skin at his throat reminded him of the wattles on a gobbler turkey. He was gray, ancient. His entire countenance was unappealing. "I don't believe I'll ever look into a mirror again," he said.

When he set the lamp on the round table in his bedroom, it cast its glow on the window. As he glanced up he was startled by his reflection, stark against the black of the night. "It seems as if I'm doomed to bump into myself tonight," he mumbled. "The rest of me don't look a blessed bit better than that face in my shaving glass." Looking at the table, really seeing it for the first time in years, he was surprised to see her glasses. "Like the hound, she was too old to carry a young'un, wasn't no need, but mine, for it happening," he said aloud.

Walking slowly to the mantel to get his glasses, he noticed some dried flowers arranged in a little gray vase. "How is it that flowers can still look so pretty long after they're dead, and me, who's supposedly still alive, looks like a spectre?"

He took his glasses off the mantel, wrapped the wire earpieces around his ears, went to his rocking chair, sat down, and picked up a dog-eared copy of Cooper's *The Deer-Slayer*. There were three other books in the cabin: Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and her Bible. The first three were obtained by his mother, who thought that her children should be educated, but the Bible was hers, from her people. He

was the only one to read the first three. Four of the five children had died before they were old enough to read, and oddly enough, the one son that did read, read only his mother's Bible. "He may have read it but it must not have took," he thought. "Not with his gamblin' and whorin' and getting shot to pieces by that woman's husband for being where he had no cause nor right."

He felt himself nodding, so he took off his glasses and laid them and the book on the square table by the chair. As he stood up, the old chair creaked, causing him to recall the nights he had heard that chair when she was nursing the children or soothing them through the colic or the final fevers that took two of them. "Until she died I never sat in that chair, never," he recalled. "I don't recollect sittin' anywhere except in the chair at my end of the table. Even in the summer, if we was outside of an evenin', I'd sit on the ground while she was in her swing. It seemed as if my clothes always had somethin' or other on 'em. I just never felt comfortable no place except in my chair."

The old man went to the table, bent down, cupped his hand at top of the lamp's flue, and blew forcefully into the flue, extinguishing the flame. Standing at the window, looking outside, he saw, in a shaft of moonlight, the smoke from the chimney drifting to the ground. "Smoke's goin' to the ground," he observed. "Be a snow in three days."

It had cleared off and the temperature had fallen until the water in the air had turned to ice crystals. As the old man stared toward the starlit ridge and the emptiness

beyond, he whispered what he whispered every night: "Maybe tomorrow. Maybe, tomorrow."

One of These Days

"You're not going to speak to me all the way home, are you?"

"I may not speak to you again. Ever."

"It was your idea, so in a way it was your fault too. 'Go ahead, Dave, it'll make Jenny happy,' you said."

"But you didn't have to do what you did. *You* hurt Jenny, and because of it she may never speak to *me* again."

"Look, Stella, we came down here for a vacation. I didn't want to go to church. I don't go to church at home, why would I want to attend Wednesday night services at the Wings for Jesus Old Time Evangelical Full Gospel Missionary Free Will Baptist Church in Humpback, Tennessee?"

"It's *Humphries*, Tennessee. Why did you have to make a fool of yourself?"

"Look, I've never been in a converted Taco-Tico with a ten-thousand dollar sound system before, so when they asked if anyone wanted to sing, I kind of got in the mood. All of that slick, canned gospel music got to me. . . ."

"And when you got up there you just had to scare the hell out of the little girl who was singing by vaulting over the rail, and when it was your turn to sing, taking the microphone away from her, and yelling: 'Welcome to the Wednesday night Karaoke for Christ,' didn't you? And if

that wasn't bad enough, you had to ask the man working the sound system if they had 'Louie, Louie.'"

"That's my favorite song."

"Dave, those people were there because they believe, and they enjoy loud, contemporary Christian music."

"Yeah, a couple of the numbers were so freaking contemporary I thought the old lady with the 40's back-sweep hair-do was being backed up by the Grateful Dead. I kept expecting them to start toking up."

"Dave, be serious."

"If I get serious, you'll stay pissed at me. As long as I can make you smile inside, and you are smiling inside, you'll forgive me."

"You bastard, you. I thought I was going to die laughing until I saw that one guy, the one that looked as if he should have had a part in *Deliverance*, start toward you."

"He wasn't mad about the music, he only hit me because he was jealous. That hot little number in the pink polyester pantsuit was lusting for me. It must have been my moon-walk that started her drooling."

"That really wouldn't surprise me. I went to high school with her. She was the FFA sponsor. Only with her, the FFA stood for free-for-all."

"Why'd you ever leave old Humpback? These mountains are beautiful, and the people are friendly--as long as you don't count the Christian Fundamentalists."

"When I left UT, I wanted to be a concert pianist, a teacher, a rocket scientist. . . ."

"Just what I hate about you: no ambition."

"As I was saying, I wanted to do anything that would take me out of old Humpback, Tennessee. Really, the reason I wanted to leave was so I could meet you, bring you back here so you could make a fool of me in front of my friends and family."

"Can't say as I blame you for wanting to leave."

"Are you getting hungry? I can stop when you want."

"Yeah, let's stop at a real greasy-spoon. Or maybe a truckstop with a waitress named Sudie Mae. Or maybe we can find a real country store and we can eat boloney and crackers and hog skins and wash them down with Royal Crown Cola, or as you pronounce it: R-uh Cee. Yeah, let's do that."

"Let's stop at the Olive Garden in Siler City and order salad and bread."

"Fine, Stella. Think only about your needs: you, and your need for fancy restaurants; you, and your need for vegetables; you, and your need for low fat food. All I need is grease. I don't need a menu. I don't need a plate. They can hook me to the deep fryer with an IV and mainline the grease to me. So what if my skin starts to wrinkle up until I look like a freaking Shar-Pei? Who cares if my cholesterol drops below two-fifty and I go into grease withdrawal and do obscene things at Jiffy-Lubes? Who cares if pictures of the *Exxon Valdez* start to give me erections? Let's by all means get you a salad at Olive Garden."

"Look, I don't want to get into an argument about where

we eat. I want a good meal. I can't live in a McDonalds or White Castle."

"That's blasphemous, Stella. Adipose, the God of Fast Food will strike you dead."

* * *

"That did it, Dave. I can't take you anywhere. You're worse than a three-year-old. You're demented. You're a danger to yourself and everyone around you."

"What did I do that was so terrible? She liked it, it was her birthday. The waiter didn't like it, but he only likes natural disasters and unnatural sex. I could tell."

"Dave, that old lady was embarrassed. When the waiter brought out that little complimentary cake you got up and started singing 'That's Amore' to her like some sleazy Vegas lounge lizard. You didn't know all the words, and I don't believe she was ready for 'when the sex is in the sink, that's awonderfulla kink, that's what Stella say.'"

"Aw, gee, Stella I never could remember all the words to that song, but I still think she liked it. She gave me her phone number."

"Did she? That old woman? She had to be seventy."

"Well, not actually, but she would have if it hadn't been for the waiter."

"Look, Dave, he probably thought you were a lunatic. He's right, but did you have to blow out the candle on her cake?"

"Well, I didn't know if she had enough lung left. Five packs of Camels a day for sixty years kind of hampers the

old pulmonary system."

"Dave, you don't know that she smoked, you don't know anything about her."

"I think she was my long lost mother. I was stolen by Jewish housewives as a baby, and kept captive until I escaped by threatening to tattoo myself with the ink pen I was given at my Bar Mitzvah. When I smelled her, I flashed to that moment, long-ago, when she held me to her breast, and I smelled the odor that a human is incapable of forgetting: chili-dogs with kraut and onions."

"You're terrible, insane, and incorrigible."

"And you love it. Why do you laugh at me? That's like chumming for sharks: keep it up, and before long, you're ass deep in sharks."

"You've worked some magic spell over me, and it causes me to forget what a drudge my life was before you."

"Yes, you were a drudge, a scullery drudge, and you stayed that way until I, Sir Gallivant the Meek, freed you from a life of maids, nannies, Volvos, and endless Junior League meetings. You owe me big time, my hot little shiksa. And speaking of that, can we get a sleazy motel room tonight? One with 'Magic Fingers,' X-rated movies piped directly to the room, and our choice of hourly or nightly rates?"

"I hate those places, Dave. I made reservations at the Holiday Inn in Chattanooga. The only 'Magic Fingers' I'm interested in are your's on my aching neck. It wouldn't hurt so bad if you'd do some of the driving."

"I told you Stella, I don't know how to drive. I know how to subway, and I know how to cab, but from driving I know bupkis."

"How come you're Jewish now?"

"I'm on vacation. In the Olive Garden I was Italian. You got any idea what I could be in a cheap motel room once the 'Magic Fingers' are turned on?"

"Yeah, Son of Sam. No slimy motels on this trip, me bucko."

"Help, help! Officer, I'm held captive in this car with a mad Irish fishwife who thinks I'm somebody named Bucko."

"Dave, get your head back in this car. Now! Oh, shit, Dave. He's blue lighting me."

"Don't worry, Stella, I'll handle it. I'll take care of the flatfoot."

"If you so much as act like you're wanting to open your mouth, I'll castrate you with my nail file."

* * *

"This ticket is going to cost **you** seventy-five bucks: 'failure to control passenger in a safe manner.' He had to make one up to cover your stunt, Dave. Are you happy now?"

"He thought it was funny. He thought **he** was funny. That crack about me needing a car seat almost killed him. And he'll probably be nominated for 'most creative naming of a citation' at their annual awards barbecue and brutality contest."

"You need a straight-jacket, you damn fool."

"Yeah, well don't ever call me 'bucko' again. Them's fighting words ma'am. Let's turn on the radio to some redneck country music station where all the commercials are for manure or farm implements, and they don't play anything but music to slash your wrists by. Hey, do you know what you get if you play a country music song backwards? No? You get your wife back, you're no longer a crying drunk, and your boss finally starts to appreciate you."

"Why don't you play my CD of Handel's 'Water Music?'"

"It makes me have to pee."

"Play the damn CD, Dave!"

"*Jawohl, Mein Hauptsturmfuhrer!*"

"Now, sit still and shut up."

"Stella . . . I have to pee."

* * *

"Look, Stella, I got an idea. If we can't stop at some no-tell motel that has a desk clerk named Earl who has this facial tic and a black wart with three hairs in it on the side of his neck, then let's find a nice Bed and Breakfast owned and operated by an elderly woman named Dulcinea, who keeps her hair in a bun, wears those sensible shoes and opaque support hose, and collects erotic Hummels. Okay?"

"The Holiday Inn in Chattanooga, Dave."

"Gee, Stella, now I know why your mother didn't want to come: you get mean when you drive."

"Mother didn't come because she says you pick on her."

"Pick on her? Me? Hide someone's colostomy bag, and all of a sudden you're picking on them."

"She means like the time you had her and me over for dinner, and, when she insisted on washing the dishes, you started cleaning out your refrigerator. Or the time you asked her if those were her legs or was she smuggling walnuts in her stockings. Or the Thanksgiving you told her that you'd get the turkey for dinner, and then you hid that live turkey inside her kitchen cabinet. She thought it was her cat, and when she opened the door the thing ran over the top of her and chased her all over the house until she beat it to death it with the metal tube from her vacuum cleaner. And then, to top that off, you called the ASPCA on her. That's what she meant by you picking on her."

"Oh."

"Not to mention the time you listed her house for sale in the paper for half of what it's worth. She had to have her phone number changed."

"I didn't do that. Your father, or should I say, her ex-husband, did that."

"He only did it because you called him up and suggested it."

"Look, I like your mother."

"She's thankful for that. She wouldn't want to think what her life would be like if you hated her. I'm going to have to stop for gas before long."

"Good, let's stop at one of those stations that's run by a guy named Boojie or Pooter; a guy that looks as if he could give inbreeding a bad name and a place that hasn't been clean since Ford pardoned Nixon. How about that,

Stella? We could sit around the station awhile and spit on the stove to watch it sizzle, and then we could go in and measure how thick the grease is on the back of ol' Boogie's neck, and then . . ."

"We are going to stop at the BP station at the next exit, and you are going to pump the gas and put it on my business credit card. Understood, you cretin?"

"Yeah, but it won't be as much fun as staring at ol' Pooter's butt cleavage."

* * *

"Dave, what on earth do you have in all those sacks?"

"Just some badly needed supplies for our safari. I got us some caps to ward off this torrid tropical sun. Yours says: 'Will Work For Sex,' and mine says: 'Do You Know Why It's Called Golf? Because Shit Was Already Taken.' I got four jars of pickled boiled eggs and I got us some T-Shirts. Yours says: 'The Objects Under This Shirt Are Larger Than They Appear,' and mine says: 'If It's Got Tits Or Tires It's Gonna Give Ya Trouble' Let's see . . . there's six cans of Vienna Sausages; this real neat little gizmo for scraping paint off of windows; a plate with a drawing of Elvis in his coffin, with the words: 'The King Lives'; a pocket knife with a picture of the Dukes of Hazzard; and, for those intimate moments, a large bottle of Hershey's Syrup. Think of this as our survival kit."

"Did you put all of that on my card? Oh, hell, why did I ask that, of course you did. How much did it cost me?"

"Not counting the gas?"

"Not counting the gas."

"Let's see, that's forty-seven-fifty. But I also got twenty-five dollars worth of the Lucky Buck Lottery tickets, so we may break even."

"You are certifiably insane, Dave."

* * *

"Stella, before we go up to our room I want to ask you a question. Will you marry me?"

"Marry you? Is this another one of your stunts? Because if it is, I'll for sure kill you."

"Look, Stella, we're both near fifty, we've both been married before and weren't happy. Our kids are grown, and besides, I'm a U.S. District Court Judge, so, with your salary from your medical practice, we can live pretty good."

"Why do you want to marry me? Answer that and I'll give you my answer."

"You mean besides loving you to death? You mean besides being happier with you than I've ever been? You mean besides you looking so hot in your 'Will Work For Sex' cap?"

"Yes, Dave, besides those."

"Well, I guess it's because you're such a calming influence on me."

"Oh, Dave, that's the sweetest thing you've ever said. I'll be honored to marry you."

"That's great, Stella. We can get married in Vegas, in one of those tacky chapels. The kind where the organist is topless and the Justice of the Peace is an Elvis

impersonator, and our witnesses can be two transvestites named Harley and Clive. Or we could be married while we're parachuting. Or maybe we. . . ."

"Come on, Dave. I can't wait to get you in that motel."

"I always heard that a proposal was an aphrodisiac."

"Sex has nothing to do with this. I can't wait to scratch off those lottery tickets."

"If we win a million dollars, Stella, let's buy old Dulcinea's Bed and Breakfast. I'll give you her collection of erotic Hummels for a wedding present."

Red, White, and Blue Monday

He awoke half drunk and totally pissed. The traffic noise from the street below seemed to be taking a detour through his head. "Son of a bitch! Ooh, God, my head, my head." Walking to the table and lighting a cigarette took all of the strength his alcohol-ravaged mind could muster.

The table was to one side of a single room that contained the history and hope of its inhabitant. The rumpled bed at one end, cigarette-burned table and two mismatched chairs at the other were symbolic of the life lived in the walk-up above a Pakistani restaurant.

Smells wafting from below started small waves of nausea rippling through his stomach. "That Moslem bastard must be serving curried dog tonight." The small ripples were turning into a tidal wave that sent him bolting down the hall to the bathroom he shared with five other tenants.

On his way back to the room, he heard the bell on his phone. Moving as fast as his whisky-wasted equilibrium permitted, he snatched the phone off the cradle and snarled, "This had better be good, asshole."

"Oh, did I wake him from his sleepy-bye" a female voice, dripping with acid, asked.

"Naw, I had to get up to puke anyway. Whadda you want, the alimony check bounce?"

"Yes, you bastard, it bounced. And while it was bouncing, I dribbled it on down to my lawyer's office. I'm supposed to tell you that you have thirty-six hours to make it good or he'll start legal proceedings."

"Legal proceedings my ass. Does that mean he'll take something from me? What-the-fuck's left to take? What can I possibly have that he can't wait to get? What's he gonna do, take away my birthday? Kick me out of the Easter parade? What? The money is there, I was late making the deposit, that's all."

"I'll bet it is, you deadbeat bastard, and I thought you Marines were so honorable."

"Does this mean you were wrong about something? Besides, I'm not a Marine anymore."

Hanging up in the middle of one her protestations made him feel almost human, but the smells coming from Punjab The Pitiless sent him running back down the hall.

After a shower and a death-defying shave, he debated whether or not to dress, and deciding against it, took a cup of instant coffee to the bed and leaned against the warped headboard.

"What am I still doing in Jacksonville, North Carolina? Better yet, what the hell is old Punjab doing in Jax? He's making a killing selling curried road-kill as Pakistani delicacies. What a crock of shit, Pakistani delicacies. That's like Swiss war heroes."

Burning the rest of the alcohol vapors out of his brain with equal doses of self-pity, sarcasm, and instant coffee,

he dressed in a worn pair of jeans, t-shirt and loafers, and locked the door behind him.

* * * *

"Can I get breakfast" he asked the waitress.

"Sure, if that's what you want to call your lunch."

"But the sign says "Breakfast anytime," don't it?"

"Yeah, anytime I feel like fixin' it, and that ain't right now. Do you want lunch or not?"

"Oh, hell yes, I want lunch, a plate lunch: I want you to take a plate, put four scrambled eggs and two pieces of buttered toast on the son of a bitch, and then, I want you to pour me some of that septic swill you call coffee, and I want you to do it right-fucking-now, Rochelle, or so help me God I'll fire your sorry ass if it's the last thing I do. And by the way my Goddammed head feels, it may just be the last thing I do. Do I make myself clear?"

"Jeez, sure. Sure. Let a man buy a greasy spoon, and all of a sudden he's king. Rough night?"

"Look at me, Rochelle. I got the headache they've been saving for Judas, and I'm afraid to open my eyes too wide, cause I might bleed to death if I do. I feel like a whole damn sackfull of armadillos are tap dancing in my colon, and if it came down to who looks the worst, me or Truman Capote, I'd come in second to a fat, bald, ugly, drugged-out fairy, and you ask if I had a rough night. Shoot me now, Rochelle, and I won't have to eat the breakfast you are not cooking for me."

"Why do you do this to yourself? I thought you Marines

were so tough. Do you have to go to Shug's every night?"

"I'm not a Marine anymore. Besides, I have a bar tab with more zeros on the end of it than the national debt. If I don't walk through that door every night, Shug will think I'm skipping on him, and Shug, who is also not a Marine anymore, is not a guy who takes kindly to being skipped on."

"Then why don't you just quit drinking so much?"

"Are you kidding, and miss all this fun?"

Looking around at the diner, he could see why it had seemed a good investment. It had seating capacity for fifty, and the booths, tables, and horseshoe-shaped counter had that comfortable, almost time-warp effect of the 1950's: lots of pink, black, and chrome, with a big Wurlitzer dome-topped jukebox in the corner that could pump out country music one decibel above that required to kill fish. The place always seemed to smell of fried onions and coffee, a smell guaranteed to perk the appetite of anyone that can still fog a mirror.

The diner was her idea. Her being ex-wife number two. It was supposed to be their nest-egg income-maker for after his retirement. The only nest the bitch wanted to feather was her own, because three weeks after the loan closed on the place she filed for divorce. The judge, over the objections of that moray eel of a lawyer of hers, wouldn't award her the place in the settlement. The judge said that in twenty-five years on the bench he'd never witnessed such a cut-and-dried case of greed and manipulation as she was trying to get away with.

"The judge didn't help my cause all that much," he thought, "because all I really wanted out of it was the pickup truck, and not this grease-coated albatross. I can't unload the place for anything near what I paid for it because the government cutbacks slashed manpower in the Second Marine Division, and the Second Marine Division is Jacksonville, North Carolina's only reason for being on a map."

He had even offered the place to Punjab, who said, though he couldn't prove it, in what was probably Pakistani, "Not in this life, you stupid infidel." So he was stuck with the place, and that meant he was stuck with Rochelle, who was uglier than Yasser Arafat and had a mouth that could blister paint. Rochelle more or less ran the place and was an immoral den-momma to the four high school girls who waited tables and all looked alike, and thought that working there was a sure-fire way to meet and marry a Marine and get the hell out of Jackson-fucking-ville, North Carolina. The only problem was that the marriageable Marines ate at McDonald's, where the grease was younger than the counter-help, and the older Marines, the ones that could appreciate a 50's diner, ate at home.

"Rochelle, is there anything in the till?"

"About forty bucks, but I'll need most of that for the meat man."

"Meat man? You buying meat? Why don't you just roam the alleys for it like Punjab does?"

"Who's Punjab?"

"Never mind, I'll be back afterwhile. Is there anything I can get for you while I'm out?"

"Yeah, someone to practice a little safe sex with, I'm getting rusty."

"Can't help you there; besides, if you're rusty Rochelle, I believe the word for me is corroded."

* * * *

Shug's was the typical Camp-town bar: dark, with Marine Corps mementoes decorating the walls; 50's and 60's country music leaking from the juke box--lots of Merle Haggard, George Jones, and Johnny Cash; and customers who liked their beer from long-necked bottles, and their whiskey mixed with 7-Up or testosterone. Behind the bar was the kingdom of Shug, a retired Sergeant Major, who liked to hang hand-made signs expressing such sentiments as "Rugby players eat their dead. Marines eat their dates" and "There are only two kinds of people in this world: Marines and the women who leave them." Shug was mean, generally not violent--he could actually be civil, a by-product of his third ex-wife, who, it was rumored, used a cattle prod to affect this miracle. But, when provoked, he was deadly. This little personality trait meant that "Shug's Place" was a great deal tamer than the other joints in town. Shug figured that if he was going to make a living from Marines he would have to win their hearts and minds. But he knew that once you get them by the balls, their hearts and minds come along peacefully. Nobody messed over Shug; nobody

skipped out without paying a bar tab; and absolutely nobody remained healthy bad-mouthing the Corps. In other words: Shug could hurt you so bad, you might get better, but you would never get well.

"I know I gotta get out of this, Shug, but just what I gotta do to do it I haven't figured out yet. I could probably get a job, but who pays the kind of money I need? Guy from a collection agency called up and told me they'd settle with me for ten cents on the dollar. I asked who he knew that had *that* kind of money. Give me a job here, Shug, I could tend bar for ya."

"When we were Marines, you were a good Marine, but I got two ex-Marines workin' for me now. One steals and the other drinks on the job. I don't need two of a kind."

"Aw, I might take a taste now and then, but I'd never steal from you, Shug. I'd be too fuckin' scared."

"Get a real job, no matter what it pays. Your liver couldn't last six months in here."

"A real job? Just what do you classify as a *real* job?"

"Anything that pays *real* money, you asshole."

"What can I do, Shug? All I ever done in my life that I was any good at is Marine. I don't have any skills. I was infantry, for Chrissakes. They ain't much demand for my vocational abilities in the real world."

"Then go back in the Corps. You only put in twenty, and you're still young enough to put in ten, twelve more."

"I don't see no way in hell of that ever happening. I'd have to be stone cold crazy to put myself back in the

Crotch."

"Maybe you just ain't crazy enough yet. Look, I got a friend of mine owns a business that you have all the experience you'd ever need. Go see him, tell him I sent ya and he'll probably put ya right to work. Then you can start paying off your bar tab."

"What kinda job is it, Shug?"

"He runs a collection agency, and you may have never worked a day at it, but you'll fit in fine. You know all of the excuses. Hell, you invented half the ones in use today."

* * * *

"Whatever you do, get them to promise something. That way when I play the tapes it'll prove we're trying to collect, but the lying bastards won't come across. Don't believe a thing they tell ya. All of them have some sob story that's guaranteed to rip the heart out of Leona Helmsley, but remember, you're dealing with professional deadbeats and it's all a lie."

"You tape the phone calls?"

"Of course. Some of 'em are hilarious. Don't worry, you'll get used to it. Here's a stack of calls. As you make them, write down the time and date you called, how much they'll send in, and when it can be expected. When you're finished, we'll sort them by dates promised, and when that day comes and we don't have the money, I'll call 'em back and get nasty. Hell, you Marines are supposed to be bad."

Maybe I ought to let you get nasty with them, maybe pay some of the worst ones a little visit."

"I'm not a Marine anymore. Can I use this desk?"

* * * *

"Honest to God, Mister, I don't have a cent. He was sent to 3MarDiv, Okinawa, and I had to move off Camp and his pay record was lost and I haven't been able to pay. I offered to bring the T.V. back, but they told me they wanted the money or they'd take me to court. I paid fifteen bucks a week for eight months on the thing, you'd think that'd be enough, but they want that last four months."

The weekly payment was typical of the way merchants around any military base operate. They'll sell a two-hundred dollar T.V. set that few G.I. families can afford to pay cash for, and finance the thing for fifteen bucks a week: "Yes indeed, I'll get you a weekly payment you can live with, always happy to help our boys." Do this for a year and you make a slick six hundred buck profit, all in the name of patriotism. **Everything** was financed this way because banks won't lend young military personnel a dime; so, everything from televisions, to cars, to washing machines is financed by the merchant for an "affordable weekly payment."

"Look, hon, I can sympathize, but the guy I work for is a real hardass. Can't ya send in something, anything at all?"

"Mister, if I could get work, maybe then I could send something, but the only thing I ever done is waitress, and

around here they either want ya half naked or willing to go down on the customers and I just can't go that route."

"Look, I know where you can get a job waiting tables in a diner. It won't be for many hours a day, but at least you stay dressed and perpendicular. Go to this address and tell the ugly woman behind the counter to put you to work and I'll talk to the guy about the television."

* * * *

After going by the appliance store and telling the owner to either settle for the money he'd been paid or he would most assuredly break every television screen he possibly could before the cops got there, and if the guy thought he could collect anything from him for the damage, he'd have to get in line behind his ex-wives' lawyers, he made another stop before returning to the diner.

* * * *

"Rochelle, I need to talk to you."

"You've changed your mind about the safe sex, haven't you? I always knew my unrelenting beauty would win you over."

"No, Rochelle, it ain't sex I need to talk about, it's about this place. This place can make its own payment and your salary, but it can't support me, two ex-wives, two lawyers and my ex-wives' cubs, so I'm gonna give it to you."

"Now I know you're a crazy Marine."

"That's just it Rochelle, I am a Marine, and that's all I know how to be. I went out to LeJeune today and re-enlisted in the Big Green Whore. My salary will meet my

alimony payments and I won't have to worry about eating."

"You're serious, aren't ya? You did re-enlist; you went back in."

"Yeah. Now, shut up and listen up; here's what I want you to do. There will probably be three or four young women show up here saying a guy at a collection agency told them they could get work. As they show up, fire one of the teeny boppers. Tell them if they're looking for young Marines, to get a job at McDonalds, or join the Corps. These women are the wives of Marines and they need all the tips they can get. The Second Marine Division is forming a Marine Amphibious Unit, and it's going to Beirut, Lebanon, as part of a United Nations peace-keeping force. I'm mounting out with it as platoon sergeant. Just make the payment on the place and give yourself a raise every time you can, and when it's paid off, I'll sign the deed over to you. If you can't make it, just lock the door and let the bank take the son-of-a-bitch. Either way, I'm out from under it. Can you do it, Rochelle?"

"Sure, if that's what you want. I won't let you down."

"I'd bet my pension on that Rochelle. I'll make you a deal: When I come back from Beirut, if you've put ol' Punjab out of business, I'll take ya up on that safe sex. Okay?"

"Who the hell is Punjab?"

Ninety Day's Time

"What do you expect me to do with these?" he asked

"Take them in the back and work your magic, man. Melt them down and turn them into solid gold," the thin, white junkie answered.

Looking at the handful of gold chains that were anywhere from ten to eighteen carats, the man was tempted.

"Every one of them's broken. I told you before, I won't buy broken gold chains. Take them some place else."

"Come on, man. I didn't steal those mothers. My old lady gave them to me. She tricked a little ass for some snatch and grab spade, man. He gave them to her. I just want enough out of them for a little product, man, I'm starting to hurt."

As tempted as he was, he told the junkie not to slam the door on his way to Morris's, a pawn shop that wouldn't question the provenance of the chains.

"How come I got to be so honest?" he asked himself. "God himself couldn't prove those chains were stolen, and now Morris, that thief, will make the profit I chased away."

He knew he'd taken in pawn, or bought outright, stolen merchandise; it was impossible not to. A pair of binoculars, unless they were marked, looked just like any

other pair. If a thief came in dressed well and was polite, he had little reason to think the guy was a thief. He wouldn't question the whores in the neighborhood too hard, because many of their customers did give them rings and watches. But never junkies, and never junkies with broken chains.

"It's nine-fifteen, I'm open less than a half-hour, and already I've lost money." He looked up at the tinkling of the bell and watched an attractive, middle-aged woman walk cautiously toward the counter.

"Yes, ma'am, can I help you with something?"

"Will you take a ring in pawn? I . . . I need a thousand dollars. I need it today."

"Lady, for me to lend a thousand on a ring it would have to be a three, three-and-a-half carat solitaire, worth about ten grand. You got that kind of ring?"

A long, white, tapered hand removed an exploding star from an alligator bag. As the light from the window danced across the myriad facets of the diamond, his breath caught in his throat, and as he reached for his loupe, his hand had a slight tremor.

Placing the loupe to his eye, he marveled at the cold hard brilliance he held in his hand. "This is exquisite," he thought aloud, "I've never seen, much less held, a stone of this quality."

"Yes, I know. It's all I have left. I need a thousand dollars. Will you give it to me for the ring?"

As he looked up he was surprised to see tears making

rivulets in her make-up.

"Lady, this ring is worth upward of seventy-five grand. I'll give you any amount in reason, but I've got to call the cops before I give you a nickel."

She reacted as if the plug to her power source had been disconnected. Leaning her full weight against the jewelry case, she implored, "Not the police. Please, not the police. They'll only tell him. He musn't know."

"Look, lady, all I'm going to do is call the Crimes Against Property Unit and see if anyone has reported a ring like this one stolen. Please, please don't cry."

Watching the woman sob was almost all he could bear. For years he had seen his profession denigrated as the "bankers of misery," but he was proud of his honesty and the ethical way in which he did business. He was also a hopeless romantic, and the sight of this woman's misery hit him like a hammer. "Please lady, come, sit down." He walked to the door, shot the bolt and hung out his "Gone To Lunch" sign. Turning, he took the woman by the elbow and said, "Come back to my office. It's cool, and we can have tea. Russian style tea."

After he poured the hot water through the ground tea into two water glasses, he sat them on his desk. "My parents came from Russia--Minsk. This is the only way I know to drink tea." With that he took the lid from a small china sugar bowl, extracted one cube, placed it between his teeth, and took a long drink of the strong, black tea.

"See, Russian style. Now tell me, what has you so

ready to part with that ring? What's deposited you in my shop--as if I didn't have enough troubles of my own--crying like your heart was broken?"

"Do you serve tea to all your customers? Or just the hysterical middle-aged female ones? Thank you, by the way, but I came here because I need a thousand dollars. I didn't think a confession was required collateral."

"It isn't, lady. . . ."

"Kay. Please, call me Kay."

"It isn't, Kay. All I wanted was for you to calm down. Sometime, talking helps. But you don't have to say a word. If the cops say they got no reports on a stone like that I'll give you a thousand. I'll give you any amount within reason. But, you have to understand, if you can't pay the monthly interest, or pay back the principle with my fee, you'll lose that diamond. Do you understand that?"

"It doesn't matter, I have no other recourse but to do business with you."

"No, Kay, you're wrong there. You can do business with any other pawn broker in the city. You can take that ring to Tiffany's and sell it outright. You can sell it to any jewelry store for a great deal more than the price you need. So, *nu*, maybe you can understand my asking: why me?"

"I can't sell it at Tiffany's because that's where it was purchased. I can't sell outright because the jeweler's want the provenance of the ring. If I tell them, they'll call my husband. Oh, it's my ring alright, don't concern yourself with that. But they'd feel obligated to call him,

anyway. As for pawn shops, you have a certain reputation. I asked people that frequent establishments as yours, and you come highly recommended. Not only for the percentage you will lend, but also your of discretion. I'm not afraid that you'll inadvertently tell someone of the ring, thereby jeopardizing me."

"Lady, it is no one's business about the ring. If you pawn it, that ring will be locked away in a bank vault until you redeem it or forfeit it. If you forfeit it, I **will** sell it to the highest offer. Then, and only then, may your husband learn of your dealing with me."

"I didn't realize that. I thought you'd sell it in your shop, or keep it yourself."

"I'm a poor man. I can't afford to buy a thousand dollar ring, much less keep a ring that size. I could never sell that ring to the people who do business with me, so I'll have to sell it to regain my investment and make a profit. Albeit, a ring of this quality would return a sizable profit on a thousand dollar investment. That's why I urge you to sell it outright."

"Will you buy it?"

"I can't afford to buy it."

"Then my time here's wasted. Thank you for the tea."

"Lady, I am still a pawn broker. Isn't that what you came here to do? To pawn a ring? Please, sit back down."

"Mr . . . ?"

"Katz, Hyman Katz."

"Mr. Katz, I'm pregnant."

"*Mazel Tov*, your husband is a lucky man."

"My husband isn't the father. I need the money for an abortion. I can't write a check, because the accountant will tell my husband. I can't withdraw the money for the same reason. My husband gives me anything I want, but he is strict in the accounting."

"A lady of your means doesn't have a little money put aside?"

"I did, but I gave it to the father of my child"

"Why not let your husband think he's the lucky man? What's one more child? Children are the blessing of the marriage."

"We have no children. While my husband is vigorous, shall we say, he's sterile."

"So, now we get to your problem."

"Yes. Actually, my problem is in a sculpting studio in the Village."

"The father of the child is making problems? Is he blackmailing you? Threatening to tell your husband if you don't pay him?"

"No. God, if it were only that simple. Paul **wants** the child. He wants me to divorce my husband, marry him, and have the baby."

"Is this a possibility?"

"In no way. I'm in love with my husband. This insanity was never to have happened. It had never happened before. You must be thinking that this is a middle-aged rich woman's fling: falling in love with a pretty face."

Sowing wild oats. It wasn't. I have always loved the visual arts. But, I had never sculpted. I asked my friends about sculptors who taught and Paul was highly recommended. I went to his studio and started learning to sculpt."

"And you fell in love with the man?"

"No, I fell in love with the artist, but not the man. I think I fell in love with the artist's hands. His hands are so beautiful: strong, broad, with long supple fingers. His hands took on a life . . . no not just a life, but a *presence* of their own. The way he could take a clump of clay and mold it into life mesmerized me. He could sense it, and when his hands touched me I felt he was molding me. We made love. No, not love. We had sex. I apologized to him. Can you believe that? I told him I was sorry it had happened and that it could never happen again. I stopped the lessons, and gave him all of the cash I had: he had turned customers away to give me private lessons. I thought cash could assuage my guilt, but then I found out I was pregnant. Like a fool, I told Paul. Why? I have no idea. Then he started to pressure me about the child. Now I'm in the office of your shop, telling my most intimate thoughts and feelings to a stranger."

"Give me the ring; I'll get your money from the safe. Fill out this card--name, address, description of the ring--and you'll have ninety day's time, ninety days understand, to redeem it."

"No moralizing, Mr. Katz? No talking me out of it?"

"No. We all have our problems, you're no different. I

deal in merchandise, I'm not a Rabbi or a social worker. Your life is your life, but ninety days of that life are all you have to redeem this ring, then I'll sell it. Okay?"

"Thank you. Thank you very much, for the money and the tea. Good-bye, Mr. Katz"

"Shalom, Kay."

* * *

Four months later, just before closing, the phone rang.

"Hyman? This is Detective Sergeant Spinelli of the Crimes Against Property Unit. Look, I was just informed by the burglary detail that a diamond ring, upwards of three carats, has been reported missing."

"Missing, Detective? Not stolen?"

"That's just it, Hyman, we don't know. A guy by the name of Edward Winslow called us about the ring. He just came back from France, and the ring was missing. Seems his wife, Kay, was killed in a skiing accident in the French Alps. After the funeral, he was having her stuff inventoried so the will could be probated--you know, if she wanted to leave a certain bracelet to somebody, then that bracelet needs to be accounted for--and all of her stuff checks out except for this one ring. He thinks some one must have stolen it while they were away. Seems they didn't put their valuables in the bank, what with the security in their condo. Look, this ring is going on the hotsheet today, so if by any chance anyone is stupid enough to try to hock a ring worth that much, let us know. Okay?"

"Yes, Sergeant, I will."

A Day's Work

"Why in the world don't he cut his grass? I'm sick of people riding by and staring at his yard. And I'm tired of how bad it makes mine look. One of these days I'm gonna hurt that old fucker."

"Why do you let it upset you so? He's seventy, and he's sick. He can't cut his grass. Why do you have to be so mad? I swear, Larry, I don't know who you are anymore. Storming off is your typical reaction. Slamming doors, squealing tires, and cursing other drivers are your best social skills. It's got to where you abuse everyone and everything in your life. The neighbors hate you and the few people who want to be around you are, to some degree, like you. Please, Larry, talk to someone."

"Get off my back, Monica. I do a day's work, and I work too hard for this shit. I don't punch the damn clock just so I can come home and listen to a blast of shit from you. Stay off my back or find some place else to live."

"Why won't she leave me alone," he muttered to himself as he drove toward town. "Bitch don't believe I'll kick her out. I'll show her."

* * *

Pulling into a parking spot in front of the firing range, he almost hit a customer walking toward the door.

"Stupid bastard. You wanna get killed?"

"Damn, man. Watch where you going," the slender black man answered. "If I don't like the way you drive, what am I supposed to do? Stay off the sidewalk?"

Unlocking his trunk, Larry looked at the black man and snarled, "Fuck you, nigger."

"Who you calling nigger, motherfucker?"

As the black man started toward Larry, Larry raised his hand from inside the trunk, exposing a large caliber pistol. Pointing it at the face of the unbelieving man, he whispered, just loud enough for the man to hear, "Give me one good reason not to send your black ass to hell."

"Damn, man. Don't do this."

"Get out of here then, darkmeat, or I'll blow your shit to pieces,"

After he replaced the weapon in the soft, triangular pistol case, Larry took the pistol and his shooter's bag and walked into the firing range.

"He scares me," the range instructor said to his assistant, as they watched Larry Taul fire on the twenty-five yard range.

"The way that bastard can shoot, he should scare you. He can take that fucking cannon he's got and put six, consistent, in the ten ring."

"I've seen him. You ever seen him shoot what he calls a 'T' on a silhouette target? Three across the top of the forehead, and three down: one between the eyes, one in the bridge of the nose, then one in the mouth."

"So that's what he was talking about. When he came in and rented range time, he said that he almost shot a 'T' on some spook. I didn't know what he meant."

"He's gonna kill somebody one of these days, and I'll have sold him the weapon."

"Just remember, `Guns don't kill. . .'"

"I know, you bastard, people kill people. He's a people with a gun, and we're going to hear about him on the news some night."

* * *

As the police car sped to the scene of the shooting, the driver said to his partner, "Look, you got to calm down out here. You ain't no rookie. You got what, eight, nine years on the force?"

"Seven, Maxie. I got seven years. If you don't want to ride with me, tell the Lieutenant you want a new partner. That's all it takes."

"I don't want a new partner. I just don't want to get killed out here when you go nuts on a routine 'see the lady' call. You beat that guy pretty bad last night. He didn't deserve that. And if he did, it wasn't your place to give it to him."

"Fuck it, Maxie. Fuck him, fuck you, and fuck everybody in this whole shithole of a town. All I want is to do a day's work. I'll tell the L-T that I want a new partner. One with some balls to protect, and not an old pussy like you with a pension to protect. Now, just shut the fuck up and drive."

"I've worked hard and long for my pension. And I'm not going to let you jeopardize it. Any more stunts like last night, and I'll turn you in to Internal Affairs. You don't belong on the streets. You're a loose cannon, and you'll wind up getting a good cop killed."

"The only cop I'm ever going to get killed is you--if I ever think you snitched on me."

Larry Taul scared Maxie Anderson, and that wasn't easy. Maxie had been on the force twenty-five years and was going to retire at the end of the month. He had seen Taul's anger and rage increase each time he was passed over for promotion. Every man or woman that was promoted over Taul was somehow inferior. To Taul, they were promoted because they were black, Hispanic, Asian, or because of the ultimate insult: they were women. Taul was not promoted because his record was full of minor complaints from citizens. Taul would curse, demean, or intimidate the people on the street--much the way his father had cursed, demeaned, and intimidated him--and with all Police Departments in search of shinier public images, having someone with Taul's propensity for drawing complaints as a Sergeant was counter-productive.

The previous night, Larry had beaten a routine traffic stop so badly the guy had to be hospitalized. Larry told the Shift Commander the guy had tried to bribe him and then had resisted arrest. The guy refused to tell what really happened, so Larry had gotten away with it again.

This was not the first time Larry had used excessive

force, but this time had the worst consequences. Always, before, Larry made sure his partner didn't witness the beating. But now it seemed like he didn't care. Maxie cared, but he was too afraid of the crazy man he was riding with to say anything to the brass.

After being dismissed from the crime scene by the Shift Commander, Maxie and Larry stopped to get a bite to eat. Sammy Tong, the owner of the Chinese restaurant, didn't especially care for cops eating there. He didn't mind the discount the cops were given, it was the fidgety way his paying customers acted when the place was full of cops eating supper. Just the presence of so many cops made even the most innocent feel guilty of something.

"These slopehead bastards get me," Larry mumbled through his second portion of rice. "They think they're so damn superior. Always smiling and looking down at the floor, when what they're really doing is looking down their noses."

"What did a Chinese ever do to you, Larry?" Maxie asked. "Is it all Chinese you hate, or just Sam Tong? He damn near gives us the meals we eat, and he's not rally crazy about us being in here."

"That's what I mean. If he hates us, why does he give us such a good deal? They're sneaky bastards, that's why."

"He gives us a break out of respect. He may not like us, but we represent authority and the Chinese are taught to respect authority."

"Well, you can be a gook lover if you want, but I think

we should send them, the niggers, the Jews, and the beaners back to wherever they come from. Now, if you're through, I think we oughta go do a day's work and check out the whores."

"Who are you, Larry?" Maxie asked. "What gives you the right to hate everybody?"

"I give me the right, Maxie, and I don't hate you, at least not yet. So why don't you leave me the hell alone? Now, if you're finished with the sermon for the day, let's roll."

Maxie left a tip for the waitress. Even though he felt like apologizing to Tong, he didn't, and walked through the door to the patrol car.

* * *

"Checking out the whores" was Taul's term for harassing and intimidating the working girls on the streets. Larry justified it by claiming it caused them to move out of the district. But every time one left, three moved in. Usually the only thing accomplished was a screaming match between Larry and an indignant hustler.

"Did you hear me, bitch? I said I wouldn't let you suck my cock. Don't you ignore me, you whore. I'll run your coked-out, A.I.D.'s infected ass to jail. Do you hear me? I said I wouldn't let. . . ."

"I heard what you said, bastard," the woman snarled. "And if I wanted to suck on something that soft and small, I'd go to the store and buy me a can of Vienna sausages."

"Stop the car," Larry screamed. "Goddamn it, stop the

fuckin' car!"

As Maxie slowed the car, Larry bailed out. Both his feet touched the gutter and slipped on some spilled garbage, causing him to sit unceremoniously on his ass.

"Limp-dick fucker can't even walk," sneered one of the whores, causing the other two to break out into derisive laughter.

As Larry regained his footing, his last shred of sanity tore. Grabbing the closest woman, he punched her in the face and felt her teeth shatter under his fist. The other two women piled into him, and he broke the fingers of one as she tried to claw his eyes. The other, the one who made the crack about the Vienna sausages, found a brick and hit him on the elbow as he used that arm to protect his head.

Larry pulled his weapon from its holster. He looked at the woman and said, "I'm gonna do a 'T' on you, you cunt."

Larry slowly raised the pistol, tightening his finger on the trigger. When he had the woman's face squarely in his sights, a nightstick slammed into the back of his head, sending him into oblivion.

* * *

"Taul, as of this minute you're suspended," the assistant chief stated, "and I'm demanding your badge and weapon until the results of your hearing. I am also advising you to hire an attorney, because I wouldn't be the least surprised if you don't face criminal as well as departmental charges. That's all. Get out of my sight."

Seething with rage, Larry laid his badge and service

revolver on the desk and walked out of Police Headquarters. As he drove home, his rage intensified.

* * *

"I'm gonna kill that old pussy, Anderson. Some partner that bastard was. Fuck him. Rotten whores. I do a day's work, they break the law, and I get fucked over. I'll find 'em and I'll kill all three of the cocksuckers."

Larry looked down at the huge pistol lying on the seat beside him. He felt comforted by its presence.

The streets were deserted this time of night, and the horn blowing behind him roused Larry from his thought.

"Hey man, how many lights you gonna sit through?" an angry voice asked.

Larry looked through his rear-view mirror to the dilapidated pick-up behind him. Moving very quickly, he picked up the weapon from the seat, opened the door, walked rapidly to the truck, and shot the man between the eyes.

"You're not in such a bigass hurry now, are you, fucker?" he said to the corpse.

Larry, in spite of the rage coursing through him, drove off in a calm, almost serene manner, as if the carnage behind him had not occurred, much less had been his doing.

He turned onto his street and passed the house of his elderly neighbor. Seeing the unkept yard made the rage boil even higher. Larry stopped his car in front of the old man's yard, picked up the .44 magnum, and walked up to the house. The porch light was on and, to his delight, he saw the old man in the doorway. Larry stopped and raised the

pistol. When the old man's head was in his sight, he tightened his finger, taking up the slack in the trigger.

The man was dead before he heard the roar of the huge gun.

* * *

"Good evening, I'm Derek Sloane and this is WKRT's eleven o'clock news. Our lead story tonight is a murder. Seventy-year-old Walter Morris, of 4315 Aldershot, has been charged in the shooting death of off-duty Bradenton police officer Larry Taul.

In a statement to the police, Morris said Taul's wife, Monica, had warned him that Taul, on many occasions, had threatened to harm him. Morris said, 'I don't know what was wrong with him, but when she told me he had threatened to shoot me, I started keeping a loaded shotgun by the door. I couldn't believe it when I heard a car stop in the front and saw him coming up my walk with that huge pistol in his hand, and it aimed right at my head.'

In another shooting, fifty-eight-year-old Willie Blackmon was found shot to death a few blocks from police headquarters. The dead man was found slumped over in his pick-up truck.

Police are investigating a possible link. . . .

Five Days in the Life
of
Scoots Saxby

Day One

When Scoots was growing up on a starvation farm just outside Wonderment, Kentucky, there were a great many events taking place in the world of which he was unaware. I'm not speaking of the events that would shape the world like the Depression, the Spanish Civil War, Mussolini using Ethiopians for target practice, or even that catastrophe brought about by those dried up old hens of the W. C. T. U.: Prohibition. I'm referring to more mundane, but equally important phenomena of a more parochial nature that affected the life of a poor, Kentucky farm boy: radio, electric lights, running water to the house, and barber shop haircuts.

There was only one grade school in Wonderment, and all the kids either went there, or if they were affluent enough, they could be driven twenty-eight miles to the county seat and attend Braxton County Elementary School. Not many of them could bear up to a fifty-six mile round trip each day, so the one-room school at Wonderment was packed to the walls with those seeking knowledge, and those waiting to be tall enough to be granted a certificate attesting to the fact that the bearer had an eighth-grade education.

At one time nine of the eighteen Saxby brats were students together while the oldest daughter, Marie Antoinette, was the teacher. Armistead Duckwall's oldest boy, Napoleon, had given the teacher such a beating that he left town without his last paycheck. This condition caused the local school board a great deal of consternation about where they could find a qualified teacher on such short notice. After the Board agreed that the only qualification needed was the ability to beat the hell out of Napoleon Duckwall, Marie Antoinette was offered the job. That year the student's lessons in the three "R's" weren't nearly as important as the lessons they learned in the three "S's": Sit down, Shut up and Stay alive. Napoleon caused no trouble for Marie Antoinette. In fact, they were married as soon as the school year was completed. Scoots was in school that year and hated every minute of it, so it surprised no one when he started to skip out on class and wander around town.

Wonderment, at the best of times, has never been a boomtown, and 1934 was not the best of times. There was not much to see or do in town; prohibition had taken care of the saloons and religion couldn't draw as many people to a revival as a fender-bender could attract at midnight. Scoots was not allowed to enter the pool hall; not because of parental protestations, but because the pool hall was where a half-pint of bootleg hooch could be bought and a twelve year-old boy didn't have the money. Besides, Paddy Kildaire, the owner, had a sign over the counter: " Minors

are discouraged." Now Paddy had less use for an easily discouraged minor than a regular one, so a twelve year-old boy--with the money--could get a half-pint of bootleg hooch--he just couldn't shoot a game of eightball.

Any place that charged an admission--the movie house, or the skating rink--was out; so was any place that had a high turnover of customers: the grocery or the gas station. The latter would run kids off because they were under foot or were taking up a space that could be filled with a cash customer. This left only one place in town that a raw, unformed, penniless twelve year-old could loaf. This spot would help form the young man; it would teach him about the mysteries of the world--women and booze--enhance his vocabulary, and teach him the good grooming techniques that would stand him good service the rest of his life: the barber shop. Big Swede Goldberg's Barber Shop.

When Moishe Goldberg was born everyone asked his father who he thought the baby looked like, him or the child's mother. Avner Goldberg, without a moment's hesitation replied, "Personally, I think he looks like the Big Swede that lives downstairs." From that day forward Rivka Goldberg called her son *Big Swede*. No one was ever quite sure whether she did this out of spite . . . or piety.

Moishe was neither big nor Swedish nor, possibly, Goldberg, but the name, Big Swede, covered him like a cheap suit.

Moishe was big, raw-boned, and possessed of a strength of legendary proportions. The shock of reddish blond hair

was probably more of a testament to a Cossack or a Pole in the wood pile of his family tree, than to anyone from the Norse countries.

Moishe grew up to have a personality that matched his appearance: big, open, and warm. His size enabled him to get a good-paying job on a beer wagon when he was twelve, and had him fighting professionally by the time he reached sixteen. Artie Goldblatt, Swede's manager, when first seeing Swede knock out two men who were tormenting his horse outside a saloon with one punch, thought he had another great "Joosh Champeen," but Swede's size was a detriment to him in the ring. He was too slow to get out of the way. While one punch from either of Swede's fists was guaranteed to end a fight, so was one good punch to Swede's forehead. Artie bemoaned the fact that, "other fighters have glass jaws, but you, you got a glass kugel, one klop between the eyes and you're zotzed." This fact ended Swede's boxing career, and before he could get his job back on the beer wagon, America entered World War One, and Swede entered the Army.

Swede never made it overseas and spent his hitch at Camp Taylor, Kentucky, where he met a fellow named Philo Saxby--one of Scoots' older brothers--from a small town in Kentucky. To hear this Saxby fella tell it, Wonderment was as close to Paradise as any man was going to see, so when his enlistment was up, he hopped on a train, and got off in Wonderment.

Philo Saxby felt responsible for Swede, and did

everything possible to get him work around town, but a guy from New York City is not likely to know much about farm work, and although Swede did know about horses from his youth on the beer wagon, there was little work to be had. One day Philo told Swede that he would have to start his own business if he wanted to keep from starving. This was a real possibility as Swede was down to two-hundred and seventy pounds and failing fast. "Vat you mean bizness, I know from bizness like I know from farming," Swede moaned.

"Ya don't talk too good, either," Philo kidded him. "So we won't get ya a job as a singing waiter, or in a Barbershop Quartet . . . wait a minute, barber shop, that's it, dammit, that's it."

"Vas is it?" Swede wanted to know, "Vat you mean barber shop? I don't have money for a haircut."

No, you big ox, not get a haircut, give haircuts. Wonderment don't have a barber. You can cut hair can't ya?" Philo asked.

"No, I don't know from giving haircuts. Why should I? What happens I give fella a bad haircut?"

"As big as you are, Swede, nothing's gonna happen, except maybe he thanks you very kindly for making him look like he caught the mange."

And that's how Big Swede Goldberg's Barber Shop came into being.

Swede eventually came to be a good barber, and his shop was the scene of the naming of Scoots Saxby.

One Wednesday afternoon, Scoots was supposed to be in

school, but in fact was sitting around listening to all of the lies being told in Swede's place. Bernard Jarber came in and started telling about his adventures in France during the war. When Bernard just about had the madammoozelle--as he pronounced it--stripped down for action, Swede noticed a twelve-year-old boy hanging on every word.

"Scoots, Zaxby, you scoots, go on otta here," he he said in his thick accent.

Scoots, not realizing he was being spoken to, kept listeng to Jarber's tale. "You, kid," Swede said again, this time more forcefully.

"Who, me?" Scoots replied.

"Yez, you. Scoots, Zaxby. Go on home, scoots."

This sounded for all the world as if Swede was calling him Scoots Saxby, and Scoots said, "My name ain't scoots, it's George." This was too good for the men in the shop, and before long he was known as Scoots all over the county.

Once Scoots became used to his new name, he rather liked it. He felt that it set him apart. And when you're one of eighteen children, and your twin brother has the same name you do, it's important to feel unique.

Day Two

Sid Livermore would be seventy-one years old now, and Sid's been in the grave forty-nine years and is still missed and mourned by the people of Wonderment, Kentucky. I can remember Sid as a child: happy, bright, and full of adventure beyond any right for one so young. Sid was a star

athlete at Braxton County High School, won State-wide contests in mathematics, played trombone in the school orchestra, and had pictures of airplanes and movie stars plastered all over the walls of the garage at home. I remember Sid Livermore, all right, but what I remember most is when Scoots Saxby and Sid Livermore fell in love. There's them in Wonderment says that they're still in love.

Sid Livermore, born Sidney Louise Livermore, was the joy of her parents' existence: polite, well mannered, and solicitous of the wants and needs of others. People in town called her "Sid," not because she was boyish, but because it suited her personality. Sid was always rushing here and there, trying to keep all of her irons hot, and it was just more expeditious to say, "Hi, Sid," than "Hi Sidney," because she would be out of earshot by the time the "ney" cleared the speaker's lips.

The masculine spelling of her name came about when Dova Livermore was pregnant with Sid. A radio show, *Sophisticated Society*, which was Dova's favorite program, appealed to the snobs and the pretenders to the snobbery around Lexington, and Louisville. This program interviewed the authors, artists, and actors that might be staying or stranded in either of those two cities and on one show featured a British novelist, Sydney Baselton Collingswood, who, to Dova's surprise, was a woman. Dova immediately told Axtel, her husband, that if the baby was a girl, she would be called Sydney. It's such a wonderful thing how the radio taught Dova that Sydney could be a girl's name; it's a damn

shame it didn't teach her how to spell it.

Sid was tiny, not small, but tiny; at five-feet four inches and one hundred and eleven pounds, she was called pert, sassy, and by all of the boys at Braxton County High School, she was called very often. Sid was a great dancer, and the Big Bands and the "jitterbug" were her cup of tea. In fact, that was how she and Scoots met; he called Frank Sinatra an effeminate derogative and she knocked him on his ass. Scoots was in love with her before the seat of his pants got dirty.

Townspeople felt that Sid and Scoots were mismatched:

"What does that wonderful child see in that damn Saxby brat?" they would ask. They were of the opinion that the kids were of two different worlds, but they weren't. Sid and Scoots felt that they had socioeconomic parity: Sid's daddy owned The Elk Belly Saloon, and Scoots' daddy helped further that ownership.

To be an only child and an only child of two doting parents like Dova and Axtel, Sid was the least affected individual in town. Dova took on airs of gentility, and Axtel treated himself to barbershop shaves from Big Swede Goldberg, but Sid had no pretensions whatsoever.

Scoots was a humble young man with a great deal to be humble about, but he had two things going for him: he loved Sid with all of his might and she felt the same about him. When they graduated from high school in June of 1940, they planned to work for a year and a half and be married on Christmas Day, 1941.

Like all Americans, Pearl Harbor changed the plans of Sid and Scoots: Scoots joined the Army in February of 1942, and Sid went to California to get a job in the war industry so she could save up a nest egg for Scoots' return.

As a child Sid was crazy about aviation and aviators. Her bedroom wall was lined with pictures of famous aviatrix like Pancho Barnes, Jackie Cochran, and Sid's special hero, Amelia Earhart. Sid was not sexist in her love of pilots because intermixed with the females were such male pilots as Wiley Post, Eddie Rickenbacker, Billy Mitchell, Toohey Spaatz and Charles Lindbergh. Sid was never a disobedient child, but she was willful: every time a barnstorming troop came within hitchhiking distance of Wonderment, Sid would go, her parents' wishes otherwise notwithstanding. And to rub a little salt into Axtel's mortification, she would pay any price asked to fly in machines that didn't look as if they would be safe to jump out of. That Sid took a job with Curtiss Aviation came as no surprise to the people of Wonderment, but what came next is still talked about by us old timers over cold beer and warm memories.

In 1943 Scoots was dodging Japanese bullets on New Guinea while Sid was dodging come-ons in Los Angeles. Scoots would always believe that the bloodstain on the letter was an omen of bad things to come, but the blood on the envelope was not a result of combat, but of an Army postal clerk cutting himself with a bayonet while trying to open his sixteenth can of Schlitz of the morning. Scoots read the first paragraph of the letter to his foxhole

buddies and asked:

"What the hell is a wasp?" His buddy replied, "A winged insect with a poisonous sting, you dumb Kentucky bastard."

"Not that kinda wasp," Scoots explained. "My girl says in her letter that she's joined the Army Air Corps and is going to be a W.A.S.P.."

"I don't have the foggiest idea what that is, Scoots, but if you **can** read the rest of her letter I'll bet she tells ya."

Sid did explain in her letter what a W.A.S.P. was, and how happy she was to be one.

One night on the swing shift Sid saw a recruitment poster for the W.A.A.F.--Womens Auxiliary Air Force--and being tired of being pinched and propositioned, went down when she got off from work to see what it was all about.

The Army Air Corps recruiter was ecstatic when Sid walked in and really turned on the sales pitch. Everything was sailing along smoothly until he told her what the duties of a W.A.A.F. would be.

"For years the Air Corps has had men as typists and drivers and other support personnel. But with the war on we've decided to accept women into the Air Corps to relieve these men from the desks and get them in combat where they belong," he purred. "You will be doing a double service for your country: serving in the W.A.A.F.s and helping to free a man for combat."

"You're telling me that I won't get to fly anything but

a desk, aren't you? Sid asked. "I'd rather stay on the line at Curtiss' and make decent money than be a typist for the Air Corps for sixty-eight bucks a month--thanks, but no thanks."

"Wait a minute," the Sergeant pleaded. "Do you have a High School education?"

"Yes, I do," answered Sid, "from Braxton County High, in Kentucky."

"If you can show me that diploma," the Sergeant stated, "and pass some intelligence tests and a damned hard physical, I can put you in a flying position in the Air Corps."

Sid signed the papers that day and was on her way to becoming a W.A.S.P..

The W.A.S.P.--Women's Auxiliary Service Pilots--were formed to ferry bombers, fighters and any other aircraft from the manufacturer to the airbases where they were destined. Later, after it was discovered that these women could really be counted on to do the job (the question was only in the minds of the male hierarchy), they were allowed to ferry these warplanes to England and the Bomber and Fighter Bases at the front, thus freeing more pilots for combat.

After arriving at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio, Sid was found to be slightly myopic, and therefore not pilot material. But her skill in mathematics, which won her awards in high school, allowed her to remain in the program, not as a pilot or co-pilot, but as a navigator in a bomber

crew. Sid was not the least bit disappointed; she was flying, and that's what she wanted to do.

As the months wore on a great many changes were taking place in the lives of Sid and Scoots. Sid was rapidly amassing hours as a navigator in everything from B-17's to C-47's. She was traveling from one side of the country to the other, flying bombers from California to air bases on the East Coast and all points in between. The W.A.S.P. program was Sid's cup of tea, but things weren't going as well for Scoots.

Like many of the soldiers and marines in the South Pacific, Scoots soon learned that the Japanese was only one of the enemy: malaria, dysentery, and dengue fever racked up a very impressive casualty record, and Scoots suffered from all three. When Scoots hit New Guinea he weighed 175 pounds; when they shipped him to a hospital in Australia, he weighed 105 pounds. As sure as he could expect a Doctor to check on him every morning, Scoots could count on a letter from Sid every third day, and such wonderful letters they were: pictures of Charles Atlas cut from the backs of comic books, pictures of Lou Costello, and a Record-A-Gram--a little 78 rpm record that one could record at arcades and amusement parks for fifty cents--of Sid and her crew mates singing Bob Will's *Roly-Poly*, *Daddy's Little Fat Boy*, all jokingly, but lovingly, wishing him a speedy recovery and reassuring him of her love.

When Sid joined the service she listed Dova and Axtel as her next of kin, so when the bomber she was flying in was

reported lost between Newfoundland and Ireland, they were notified that all of the crew were lost and presumed dead. This left Dova and Axtel with a double tragedy: the loss of their only child, and the hell of having to tell Scoots that Sid was dead.

Popular belief has it that Sid's death was the cause of Scoots' drinking, but that would be too easy a solution to a very complex problem. Scoots didn't fall headlong into a bottle. He sort of pushed his way in sideways, like a man forcing his way into a crowded elevator. I personally feel that Scoots can blame his genetic pool for his bouts with the hooch as much as he could a lake of heartache. For the longest time the only day Scoots would be drunk would be the anniversary of Sid's death. Now it seems that's the only day of the year that he doesn't drink at all.

Day Three

Wonderment is very small, population 700, and is just about as far away from life in the twentieth century as anyplace in America. Wonderment has one grocery, no churches, three gas stations, the mandatory Post Office--no one is quite sure just what in hell the zip-code is, and nine taverns, with three doing double duty as liquor stores. One can understand that the town drunk would have his work cut out for him with this many options to choose from, but Scoots was up to the challenge.

Scoots is seventy-two, looks seventy-two, and when the opportunity presents itself, acts twelve. Not all of this

can be laid directly to the perpetual skinful of hooch Scoots packs around; the innate ability to choose the wrong parents can explain any behavior the booze doesn't.

Scoots' given name is George Saxby; this, in itself is unremarkable until one takes into consideration that Scoots' twin brother was also named George Saxby. This phenomenon occurred as his old man explained: " When I hollers for George, I want George, and this way I'll know I got the right one."

Scoots' father was about as bright as mud, and seemed to be blessed with the ability to father children by osmosis; he fathered eighteen children and seldom left the end stool at the Elk Belly Saloon for any greater length of time than it took to piss. Doc Marshall, when called to deliver the seventeenth , told old man Saxby: "Any man that would sire this many children that he couldn't feed or clothe doesn't deserve to live." Saxby agreed with him and swore on the head of his put-upon wife to promptly hang himself as soon as this latest child was weaned (presumably the weaning would allow Mrs. Saxby to find work to feed that tribe after the old man was dead) but when asked about his oath when the good doctor delivered the eighteenth child, the old man told the doctor: "I give that hangin' business a great deal of thought, but I decided not to get too hasty, because I just might be hangin' an innocent man."

Scoots and his twin looked so much alike that even their wives couldn't tell them apart. In fact, about the only way to tell them apart was to listen to them talk.

Scoots had perfectly good diction and pronunciation, but George never could say the word "him"; he always said, "he." The sentence: "Ask HIM what she wants," would come out as: "Ask he what she wants." Scoots and George both worked for Ivo Walker at the sawmill, and one day a belt on the edger--the edger trims the board to the required width--broke and sent a four-foot splinter through Scoots' shoulder. The crew at the mill, seeing two feet of wood sticking out in front of and behind Scoots, were quick to realize that Scoots wasn't about to fit in the front seat of a pick-up truck, and promptly pitched him in the back, and off they tore on their mission of mercy. Warren Talbot, the town sheriff, heard about the accident, headed the mill truck off, and led them, at eighty-mile-an-hour with siren screaming, to the hospital. Town legend has it that with that pick-up bouncing all over the roads you couldn't hear the Sheriff's siren for old Scoots' screaming. Scoots was still screaming when they arrived at the hospital and every time the Emergency Room crew would try to remove him from the truck his screaming would increase. This so unnerved the Nurse that she said: "What are we going to do? Every time we try to take him out, he screams." Upon hearing this George went over to the Nurse, and with all the same patience that one uses with a child, an idiot, or a Republican, said: "Just pull he out. He holler when we put he in, just pull he out."

A life such as this, to say nothing of the family Scoots sprang from, probably explains his bouts with the

bottle, but even these can't justify the heights that Scoots would attain in his alcoholic avocation.

Scoots always worked, because as he puts it: "Hell, when you drink like I do you better work, cause I run out of credit in this town two years before I was born." This is probably an allusion to his old man who was known to all of Wonderment's saloon keepers as a deadbeat and they figured any brat of his would be just like the old man and not a desirable credit risk. Well, as I was saying, Scoots was always willing to work, but something, usually an alcoholic daze, kept his employment short and precarious.

The last time the Carnival came to town Scoots was working at Hall's Apothecary-- this moved in one of the vacant buildings when one of the taverns went belly-up, where he swept up, made deliveries, and kept waiting for Lana Turner to show up. Somebody, probably old man Hall, the pharmacist, told Scoots the tale about how Lana Turner was discovered at Schwabs Drugstore, in Hollywood, and embellished it by alluding to the fact that ol' Lana wasn't doing much in movies anymore and was probably travelling all over the country, stopping in drugstores, hoping to be discovered again. This silly story, backed up by an old publicity photo of Lana in a skin tight sweater which hung over the soda fountain, was all it took to convince old Scoots that working for next to nothing for old man Hall had its benefits. It was during his tenure at the drugstore that the advance man for the Carnival came in and placed a poster in the front window that went a long way toward

sobering Scoots up--at least temporarily.

Scoots knew if he wanted to go to the Carnival some minor changes in his lifestyle were needed. The money old man Hall paid him just barely covered his booze, groceries, and the twenty-five dollars a month he sent to the State Prison to keep his wife in smokes. In his booze-induced dazes he could still grasp the realization that if he quit eating he would starve to death, and if he quit sending that monthly allotment, his wife would kill the right brother the next time, so his only nonfatal recourse was to quit drinking. For two solid months Scoots stayed sober, and the night the Carnival opened Scoots was fit to be tied with anticipation. With a bath, clean clothes, and his hair slicked back, Scoots was a sight to behold. He strolled up and down the midway like a king. He bought cotton candy, corn dogs, and ice-cold Coca-Cola: he rode all the rides . . . twice, and then he started in on the games: basketball, ring-toss, guess-your-age-or-weight--they did--and finally the Shooting Gallery. Now, like most rural Kentuckians, Scoots was a damned good shot with a rifle and the guy's spiel made the Shooting Gallery irresistible: "Step right up and win a prize--ten shots for a quarter, knock down two ducks and win a little bear, knock down five ducks and win a medium size bear, knock down eight or more ducks and win a giant-sized bear, everyone's a winner here." Well, this was all Scoots needed to hear: he stepped up, plopped down a quarter, picked up a rifle, fired it ten times at the ducks... and missed every time. When the proprietor walked

over to shake Scoots down for another quarter, Scoots looked at him and said: "Give me my prize." The guy shook his head and said , "You got no prize coming, Mister, I told ya' two ducks a little bear, five ducks a medium bear, and eight or more ducks, a giant bear. You missed all ten times, you got no prize coming."

Scoots drew himself up to his proudest stature and said:

"Yes, my good man, I am fully aware of your spiel. But you also stated that everyone was a winner, that includes me, I will take my prize now." Now this guy didn't want any trouble the first night in town, but he sure as hell wasn't going to give this yokel a bear. He went into the back of his truck and found a bowl full of those little live turtles that he gave away as prizes when he ran the Duck Pond. He took one out, gave it to Scoots, who, pride intact, thanked him profusely, and put the turtle in his pocket, and walked away. Scoots, who by this time had seen all of the carnival that he wanted, discovered that he had enough money left for a pint of whisky, left the carnival and ended a two-month-long drought. Once that pint of liquor was polished off, the memory of his disgrace at the Shooting Gallery washed over him like a riptide. Looking in his pocket he found a quarter, and returned to the scene. After giving the proprietor, who was none too happy about seeing Scoots again, a quarter, Scoots fired ten times and knocked down ten ducks. The owner of the stand picked up a teddy bear that was four feet tall and offered it to Scoots, who promptly turned him down. "What the hell Mister, you won it

fair and square, take it," the man said.

"I don't want that bear," Scoots replied. Seeing a chance to get rid of this lunatic and save some money at the same time, he offered Scoots the medium sized bear, and, when this was also refused, offered Scoots the tiny plastic bear awarded for two ducks. When Scoots turned this down the guy lost his temper: "Looka here you hayseed sonofabitch, I've offered you every goddamned prize I got. What in the name of ALL that's holy do you want?"

Scoots, not withering a bit under this blast of profanity, looked him in the eye and said: "Ain't you got anymore of those crunchy pies?"

Day Four

Wonderment, Kentucky, has one central street that intersects with nine cross-streets and none of them, including Main-- which does double duty as U.S.23, is more than six blocks long, and during Scoots' sixty-odd years he has managed to live on all of them. Wonderment has no industry; unless you count the 9 saloons and three State Liquor stores and possibly jury duty, but all the inhabitants are industrious, especially at Menlo Farquahson's Barber Shoppe. No, that's not a typo, Scoots Saxby painted the sign for Menlo for four pints of bonded whiskey of which Menlo was silly enough to pay two in advance. You might wonder why Menlo paid off in pint bottles instead of quarts ... a pint bottle will fit in Scoots' back pocket--a quart won't.

When Menlo saw the sign his first reaction was to go up to Scoots' room above Hall's Apothecary, pour him out of bed, drag him to the street and waller the livin' hell out of him, but cooler heads, or head that should be--mainly Scoots' cool head--prevailed and talked him into not only leaving it the way it was painted, but paying Scoots the remaining two pints of hooch. When it comes to talking, William Jennings Bryan and Ronald Reagan couldn't hold a candle to old Scoots. This talent is necessary if you drink as much as Scoots does, and it becomes vital if you drink as much as Scoots does and still try to function as a human being. This time when Scoots avoided bodily injury it was not through oratory or bombast, but by saying these simple words: "Just remember Menlo, I saved your marriage," and as the poet said, "Therein hangs a tale."

Menlo Farquarhson is a vain little man: five feet four inches, and 165 pounds of pure conceit. Menlo wears his hair and moustaches parted in the center and Brilliantined to within an inch of their lives. Menlo looks more like a Milanese Opera agent than a mid-Kentucky barber, so when his problem started, he took it very hard.

Menlo always said his problem was caused by the stress of a mid-life crisis. Scoots said this was so much bullshit because Menlo was seventy-five-years-old when he first experienced what Menlo was to later phrase, "temporary, occasional impotence exacerbated by severe performance anxiety," and which Scoots referred to as "being so old he couldn't get it up with a bicycle pump."

Menlo has been married to the former Fricka Wohlschlagel for forty-four years, and on the night of their forty-fourth anniversary he was unable to partake of the connubial smorgasbord that he and Fricka had shared for the best part of a half century. This sent shivers down the back of Menlo's masculinity and the clamor of a claxon echoed through Fricka's libido.

Menlo, as with many extremely vain men, is not too bright. Not to intimate that he is stupid, mind you, but with all of the vanity, self-importance, over-worked ego, and a psychological inability to walk past a mirror without preening, primping, and admiring the reflection, there is not a great deal of room for intelligence in his tiny, pea-sized cranium. He is a good barber, not a great barber. His work will never be compared with "hair styling," but his customers are satisfied and faithful. The fact that the next closest barber is seventeen miles south in Idaville keeps the dissatisfied customers as faithful as the satisfied ones, and this has kept Menlo and Fricka in a good house, nice clothes, and those hot little weekend trysts at the New Grant Hotel in Ellisville. But Menlo's licentious sabbaticals aside, he has another conceited man's problem: he thinks everyone is as interested in his problems as he is and, therefore, tends to spill his guts about anything to anyone who happens to be sitting in his barber chair when the occasion arises.

Thus, after a sleepless night wondering if he was condemned to carnal reminiscence instead of active

participation, his first customer through the door was Scoots Saxby, and, just like always, Menlo couldn't keep from airing his linen in public.

"Morning, Scoots, need a haircut?"

"Naw, Menlo, I need 'em all cut."

This was Scoots' only attempt at barber shop humor, and he had been answering that same, exact question, the very same way, at least once a month since 1946 when Menlo, after using the G.I. Bill to pay for Barber College, took over the shop from Big Swede Goldberg.

"Fore you start cuttin' my hair I need to know if you want to buy a puppy. Somebody dumped off six of 'em in the alley behind the Apothecary last night, and if I sell you the fifth, sixth, and seventh of them I can pay for this haircut."

"I don't need no damned puppies, Scoots. Besides I thought you said there were only six puppies."

"There are only six, but I'll need to sell seven of them at the price I'm asking, to afford this haircut."

"What do you do with all your money?" Menlo asked.

Scoots, replying with indignation, said: "What in the hell do you mean *all my money*? I make five bucks an hour at the Apothecary and take home about a hunerd and eighty five bucks a week, of which I give Hall back forty bucks a week for my room. He also usually docks me twenty, twenty-five bucks a week for the candy, cigarettes, and magazines he ain't supposed to know I help myself to. Then I gotta send Doris at least fifty bucks a week for her smokes and Cokes

up to the Penitentiary."

(Doris, Scoots' wife, was sentenced to 25 years for shooting Scoots' twin brother George while George was using the crapper at the Elk Belly Saloon--Doris pleaded insanity, but when she explained to the Judge that she had to have been crazy to shoot George when it was really Scoots she thought she was shooting, he lost all of the sympathy he had for her and gave her the maximum).

"By the time I get around to the non-essentials, like food, booze, car payments, and other little luxuries like those, I am reduced to sellin' puppies for the privilege of letting you butcher my goddam hair. Now if you have anymore problems with how I spend *all my money*, either get me a job with longer money or a month with shorter weeks."

Ignoring this unscootsman-like outburst, Menlo asked, "How long have you been down at the drugstore now?"

"Nine years last March, and it feels like every day of it," Scoots answered.

"Why, I bet in those nine years you've seen pretty much every medical problem in the books, haven't you?"

Menlo labors under the same misconception that all lay people do, the one that gives special knowledge or ability to the people that work on the fringes of a profession: para-legals, nurses, and in this case, the janitor and delivery man for a drugstore.

"Well," Scoots replied, "I have seen a real nasty case of impetigo--in fact, if that kid had been mine, I'd a drowned him before I'd a took him out in public, even if it

was to take him to the doctor in Idaville."

"I'm not talking about impetigo, Scoots. I'm talking about real medical problems: athletes foot, tuberculosis, emphysema, impotence, or ringworm, real medical problems."

"Tubercu . . . impotence! why, Menlo, can't you . . ."

"Oh no, not me, I can still. . . not me. . . a guy that comes in here was telling me about *his* problem, oh no Scoots, not me.

"Well, then why are you so damned out of breath talking about some other guy's problem, Menlo?" Scoots asked. "You just ain't one to sweat bullets over anybody but yourself so don't sing that "guy that comes in here" song to me, you old fart. You're having a little trouble in the old manhood department, ain't you?"

"Oh, God, Scoots, what am I going to do?" Menlo whined.

"Do? Do? Why you old fool, you must be seventy-seven, seventy-eight years old. . ."

"I'm just barely seventy-five," interrupted Menlo indignantly.

"*Just barely seventy-five, barely seventy-five?*" Scoots asked sarcastically. "It ain't a case of what you're going to do, it's what you ain't going to be doing no more. Jesus, Menlo, you're acting like the world is coming to an end."

"Oh it is, Scoots, it is," said Menlo on the verge of tears. "You gotta help me, Scoots. You gotta. I know there must be some kind of pill I can take, or exercises I can do.

Please, Scoots, ask Hall at the Apothecary. He must know of something that will help."

Scoots Saxby might be a drunk, and he may be flowing through life on a 90 proof river, but he still has enough mental faculty about himself to recognize the distress of a lifelong acquaintance. . . and take advantage of it.

"Menlo, old buddy," Scoots purred like a tom cat that upon seeing a pigeon suddenly develops a taste for pigeon, "I think I can help you, but it's gonna be expensive, real expensive."

"You can help? You can really help?" Menlo was literally bouncing with joy. "I don't care what it costs. Tell Hall that I'll pay anything, anything not to make Fricka suffer anymore."

With the interjection of Fricka into this little melodrama, Scoots physically raised his eyebrows--he just never figured Fricka for a hot a little number when they were kids--and mentally raised the cost of Menlo's cure. After all, a remedy for two people was going to cost twice as much.

"Now, Menlo, we'll just get you to the doctor over to Idaville and get you a prescription for the pills."

Menlo's vanity shifted into warp speed at the thought of anyone else learning about his problem, and besides the doctor at Idaville was a woman, and there was no way in hell that Menlo was ever going to tell a woman that **he** was having **this** kind of problem.

"I can't go to the doctor, Scoots. I don't have time.

Can't you have Hall just sell me the pills? He's done it before. He sold me that cream when Fricka had that rash, needed a prescription for that, too."

"Well, that was different, that was a cream," stated Scoots in as authoritarian manner as possible. "These are capsules and he could get into big trouble with the guvmint; you know, the F.D.A., the D.E.A., the F.B.I., and hell, maybe even the I.R.S."

Throwing that handful of alphabet at Menlo had the desired effect. Menlo may not have known what the F.D.A. or the D.E.A. stood for , but he did know what the last two were, and mental images of J. Edgar Hoover, with tommygun blazing, and minions of pencil-sharpening accountants breaking down his door raised the price once more while lowering the last of his willpower.

"Get the pills for me, Scoots, and you can name your price," Menlo whispered.

Bingo. Just the words Scoots wanted to hear.

"Menlo, old buddy," Scoots stated. "A month's worth of those pills are going to cost you fifty bucks, payable at once and in cash." These were the terms at the saloons and liquor stores that would serve Scoots, and for once in his life he could understand the power they contained.

"I'll bring you the pills tonight," Scoots said, folding a fifty dollar bill into his watch pocket. "And you'll be back on the road to marital bliss before Fricka realizes you were gone."

"What's the name of these pills, Scoots?" Menlo

queried.

This was the last question in the world Scoots was expecting, and although he was somewhat startled he quickly gave Menlo an answer: "Erectomyacin, Menlo." "They're called Erectomyacin."

That night, after sweeping the store and setting out the trash, Scoots borrowed an empty pill bottle and 30 empty gelatin capsules. Climbing up the outside stairs that led to his room, Scoots thought of all the times he had been the butt of Menlo's practical jokes. Like the time Menlo had the State Trooper stop at the Apothecary and tell Scoots that Doris had escaped and was gunning for him; Scoots lost sleep and weight worrying about that one. And now he was going to get even and make fifty bucks in one fell swoop. Life is sweet, thought Scoots. After hanging up his coat and popping a frozen Salisbury Steak dinner into the oven, Scoots set about concocting Menlo's miracle cure. Scoots opened up his cabinet and, surveying the ingredients at his disposal, decided that Menlo's "prescription" would contain equal portions of Domino Confectioner's Sugar--to sweeten Menlo's disposition--Sago Corn Starch--because starch seemed appropriate to the malady--and Sergeant's Puppy Wormer to taste--for the crack about spending all his money. Scoots worked carefully and neatly, discovered that he had mixed up enough for two or three months and he wondered how many of the damned things Menlo could take before the worm medicine caught up with him. He decided that, no matter what the results were, 90 days wouldn't do much harm to Menlo.

Besides, Scoots could use the extra hundred dollars. After putting the capsules in the bottle and the bottle in his pocket, Scoots headed over to the Barber Shoppe.

"Now listen real good, Menlo," Scoots advised.

"Whatever you do don't take anymore of these pills than one every day. They're powerful and they work quick, but you gotta take a couple of months' worth to fix you up permanent. These will last ya a month, so about three days before they run out let me know and I'll get you another month's supply."

Scoots thought that for a minute Menlo was going to kiss him, but all Menlo did was swear lifelong friendship and free haircuts for the rest of Scoots' life in gratitude for his philanthropy.

Something resembling guilt crept into the nether regions of Scoots' brain, and he came as close to sympathy for Menlo as he ever would.

"Menlo, they ain't no guarantee with them pills, and I'll try, mind you, I'll try, to keep the price down if you should need more than a ninety-day dose."

With his conscience as clear as it ever would be, Scoots ambled off to his favorite stool at the Grizzly Milk Saloon and proceeded to tear into that fifty dollar bill.

For the next 28 days Scoots watched Menlo like a hawk; he wanted to see if there was any outward sign of Menlo either becoming disillusioned with the pills or if maybe he would start panting or pissing on fire hydrants from the effects of the worm medicine. What actually happened was

even weirder than if Menlo had started hosing down hydrants. "Scoots, hey, Scoots," Menlo hollered. "Come here a minute, will you?"

Scoots looked around to see if Menlo was angry, but all he saw Menlo grinning and looking like the cat what got the cream and decided that whatever was on Menlo's mind it wasn't mayhem and crossed the street to see what Menlo wanted.

"Afternoon, Menlo," Scoots mumbled. "What can I do ya for?"

"It's about my pills. You told me to come tell you when I needed a refill and I only have a two-day supply left. You'll never know how much they've helped me. I feel like a new man. Hell, Scoots, I feel like a younger man, fifty years younger, in fact."

This bit of news was more than Scoots could bear, and he decided to forego any more money and take his satisfaction in telling Menlo how he had made a fool of him.

"I got ya, Menlo, I got your sorry ass and I also got fifty bucks of your money to boot," cried Scoots.

"What do you mean you 'got me?' "How did you get me?" asked a very puzzled Menlo.

"Those pills," crowed a smug Scoots. "They wasn't nothing in them but corn starch, powdered sugar, and puppy wormer. you old fool. They wasn't medicine. They was the best damned joke ever pulled on you and I pulled it."

"But they worked, Scoots, they really worked, they cured me. You got to sell me more of them Scoots, you got

to."

"Listen to me, you silly rooster," growled Scoots.

"They couldn't have cured you 'cause they never was nothing wrong with you to start with, except maybe being a man who's starting to get a little old and is gonna have to start realizing it."

"It's money, isn't it?" yelled Menlo. "You want more money, don't you, Scoots? Well, I'll pay. I'll pay anything. Just sell me more of the pills."

Scoots, after seeing the manic look in Menlo's eyes, started to walk away, but every step he took he was dogged by Menlo yelling, "I'll pay you, Scoots. Just name your price." Scoots started to run. Then Menlo started to run after him. Scoots was running faster than he had run in many years and a hell of a lot faster than any man his age should attempt to run, but no matter how fast he ran he could put no more than a step between himself and a screaming Menlo. Right before Scoots collapsed on the sidewalk and just a short time before Menlo collapsed beside him, Scoots heard Menlo holler, "I'll pay you anything you want, but don't take this miracle away from me. I'll pay you, Scoots . . . Hell, Fricka will pay you, too."

Day Five

Children are drawn to Scoots Saxby much in the same way they are drawn to a mangy dog; they know not to touch it, but can't keep from it. Before long they'll have it named,

tamed, and fed. Everything will be just fine until one of the mothers finds out . . . then all hell will break loose.

Scoots has been known to lose a day's work at Hall's Drugstore watching kids fly a kite; this doesn't surprise the adult population of Wonderment, Kentucky a great deal, because they think that ol' Scoots' string hasn't been firmly attached to his kite in years. Scoots Saxby is the one and only town drunk Wonderment has, but with him playing with the kids the town folk are afraid he may be grooming his successor.

Adjectives like lazy, shiftless, sorry, worthless, and sad are about the only legacy old man Saxby left his children, and Scoots, like the scions of the rich, is doing everything in his power to increase what he was left. Scoots doesn't have too many memories of what the present generation would call quality time with his father, what with him having 18 other siblings to share the old bastard with, and the old man's permanent residence on a bar stool at the Elk Belly Saloon, but Scoots does remember his one and only trip to to Ellisville, the county seat, with his old man.

Wonderment is only seventeen miles west of Ellisville, but in the thirtie's they were, as Scoots likes to say, "a long seventeen miles."

Once every three years or so, the old man would break out in enough gumption to plant and tend more vegetables than that tribe of his could eat, therefore meaning an excess that could be taken to Ellisville and sold for cash

money at the Farmer's Market. Each time this rarity occurred one of the boys would get to go with the old man to help unload when the crop was sold. 1936 was the year that Scoots went with the old bastard, and to this day he still recalls with reverence and awe the delights of Ellisville, Kentucky, in 1936.

In 1936 Ellisville was still pretty much a hell-raising town, and the majority of the people still had that "old mountain mentality" which meant it was still possible to be gunned down on Main Street for no worse offense than having a face that pissed somebody off. Scoots and his old man loaded the wagon the night before and went to bed: Scoots dreaming of the adventure and the old man dreaming of the "nickel lunch" at the new Grant Hotel that had just been opened.

The Grant Hotel plays a major role in this saga, so a little history is in order. The original hotel--called the "Busted Bitch," circa 1853-- was little more than a casino and cat-house. For years no one paid any attention to the establishment as long as no one was shot, knifed, or cheated too outrageously at the gaming tables. This soon changed when President Grant's train derailed outside of town in 1876 during a Centennial trip around the country. When the President of the United States needs a room for the night, asking him and his wife to spend that night at place called "The Busted Bitch" is not politic. The old whore house was the only place in town, however, that could lodge the President's entire entourage, so all of the miners, drunks,

gamblers, and all but one of the whores--the President did have a reputation--were evicted and the name was changed from "The Busted Bitch" to the Grant Hotel. This structure burned to the ground in 1934 in what was commonly referred to as a friction fire; the mortgage was rubbing up against the fire insurance policy, and the New Grant Hotel opened its doors in late 1935, just a few months before Scoots' trip.

The big morning dawned warm and clear, and after the team was hitched, Scoots and the old man were on their way. The old man regaled Scoots with tales about elk hunts, card games, and the finer points of loose women--or the looser points of fine women--and the seventeen miles passed quickly under the wheels of that tired old wagon. Upon their arrival in Ellisville, the old man made straight to the market and sold those vegetables for the first price offered, then headed toward the Grant Hotel and that nickel lunch.

The nickel lunch was a time-honored convention that started in the East and slowly spread West. If a fellow bought a nickel beer--which was served in a container the size of a coal scuttle--he was entitled to go to the end of the bar and help himself to a gastronomical orgy: ham, cold roast beef, cheese, boiled eggs (pickled and plain) onions, oysters, and breads of all flavors. All of the condiments to season these delights were free for the taking. It was no wonder that Scoots' old man was about to piss himself with anticipation, for it would be as long again as it had

been before that he could savor such delights again.

As they entered the bar the old man looked at Scoots and asked: "You're twelve-years-old now, ain't you boy? Well, it's high time you had a glass of beer." That simple statement sealed Scoots' fate and launched him on his career as Wonderment's resident dipsomaniac.

After drinking enough beer to float a barge and eating enough food to ease famine in a small country, the contented pair went out of the saloon and into the lobby where a marvel of science was discovered by the old man.

Mounted flush into the wall was a bronze door, and standing in front of this door was an old woman of at least 75. The door opened and a small man dressed in a uniform with shiny buttons opened a golden gate and admitted the old woman into the smallest room the old man had ever seen. The uniformed attendant closed the gate, closed the door, and the little room started to make noise. As the old man was staring at the door, he noticed a little gold arrow right above the door that was moving around a semi-circle that had numbers at regular intervals. The old man watched as the arrow went from 1 to 6, stopped at 6 and, after a short while, started to reverse its course and stop at one.

When the door opened and the attendant opened the golden gate, a beautiful brunette of about 25 stepped off. The old man grabbed Scoots by the collar and told him to hurry up and get to the wagon. "But Poppa," Scoots cried, "You promised to take me to the park."

"Hell boy," the old man replied, "I ain't got no time

to be wastin' in a damned park. I got to hurry on home, load your Momma in the wagon and bring her back here and run her through that little room a couple of times."

I think the reason Scoots gets along so well with kids is that he's so damned glad not to be one anymore.